

Injustice

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Injustice

by [Evilpixie](#)

Summary

On another world a cataclysmic disaster shatters the staunch Man of Steel causing him and the former League to take control of the planet. Only Batman is left with an underground group of rebels and a fluxing portal to another, safer, world.

Notes

This story is inspired by the events and characters of the game and comic line 'Injustice: Gods Among Us'.

For those that don't know it's kind of... Justice Lord-y... so expect a few doable ups and an evil Superman.

Also, fair warning, it's kind of fucked.

NSFW, etc.

See the end of the work for more [notes](#)

Chapter 1

Chapter Notes

For those that know the background of 'Injustice: Gods Among Us' this story picks up shortly after Bruce's capture.

For those that don't, Bruce is on another Earth, Superman is a dictator, and they're hunting for that world's Batman who is a rebel. Oh, and Lois is dead.

Also, there is some fucked fucking in here. Be warned.

"It's not him."

It was a simple statement of fact. No shock. No surprise. No great revelation.

Bruce gritted his teeth against the pain.

"What?" Hawkgirl stepped forward, her lips twisted with fury. "It has to be!"

"His DNA matches Bruce Wayne's but he doesn't have the kryptonite stimulant," Superman explained. Eyes still locked onto Bruce. "He's another double. From the other world."

A simple conclusion.

His head pounded, his leg ached, and his mouth tasted of copper. Bruce fought to keep his features impassive. His eyes an angry glare.

He was bound in thick metal gauntlets that twisted his shoulders and spine to hold his hands above his head. His own gloves, belt, cape and cowl had been removed. Only the shadowy logo of the Bat remained.

It would have to be enough.

"Well," Black Adam said slowly, "if there is no use for him..."

"We'll execute him," Superman said. "If the resistance believes their leader dead they'll lose all hope. Batman can't let that happen. He'll have to stop us. He'll have to come and rescue him." Eyes cold. "We'll use this Batman as bait. Bait to catch the real one."

A simple plan. But a plan that would lead to yet another brutally simple conclusion.

Bruce tried not to see his friend in the familiar lines of his face as he coolly ordered his execution. Tried not to see Clark in the blue of his eyes.

Hawkgirl's lips pinched together in a tight pale line that slashed across across angular features. Her eyes were hidden behind the curved shape of her golden mask. "I captured him," she said briskly. "I don't want to babysit him."

Bruce kept his eyes matched with Cl-no-Superman. This wasn't Clark. This wasn't his friend.

Pain up his spine. Muscles cramping. Head crushing.

"He is fighting off a concussion," Yellow Lantern said with a leer. "Plus his leg is fractured in two different places. I don't know what he was doing before we picked him up but this Batman is as harmless as a clawless kitten. What are you afraid of?"

"Afraid?" The woman spun to face him. "What do you know of what my kind fears, Hal?" A sneer. "I just don't want to waste my time. If you do then go ahead."

"I think," the Lantern flexed his ring finger. Yellow glittered. "You'll find I know a thing or two about fear."

"I'll take him," Superman said. Hawkgirl, Adam, and Lantern looked up. "The fortress would be able to hold him even if he was in prime condition." A thoughtful lowering of his brows. "And if he knows something I plan on finding it out."

A simple lie.

Mouth tasted like old blood.

"Leave me."

Hawkgirl, Black Adam, and Yellow Lantern all tipped their heads in a quick, informal bow, and marched out of the room. As she passed Hawkgirl landed Bruce's belt into Superman's hand. The door slid closed behind them with a hiss and a hollow thud.

Bruce waited.

"You're quiet," Superman observed, carefully weighing the belt in his hands. Sparks flew where the ends of the broken charge brushed by indestructible fingers. "If I recall correctly," he continued, "one of these pockets has kryptonite in it." Another pause. "Which one?"

He didn't answer.

"You think me the enemy. Why? Have you met our world's Batman?"

"No."

Superman's lips curled. "You sound like him," he muttered, "perfectly."

Bruce waited.

Superman threw away the belt. Metal clattered too loud in the confined room. "But you're not him."

Superman moved forward and tore him from the wall, tossed aside the useless shackles, and hauled him into the air.

Bruce growled with pain as his leg bumped against Superman's. He wouldn't cry out. Wouldn't whimper.

"Just like him," Superman repeated. His voice remained still. Cold.

The world blurred and a rush of icy air pounded against him.

He was flying. White tipped waves flirted along a rolling expanse of sea below. Freezing clouds struck him like blows, air struck the bottom of his lungs like a million miniature knives, and the pain in his leg awoke with an agonizing flare. Holding him firmly around the shoulder was Superman.

"What happened to you?"

Superman looked down at him. Dark. Angry. "You did."

An instant underwater and they were in the Fortress. Ice walls glittered with an indifferent alien beauty, distant memories flashed off crystal surfaces, and Superman's infamous crest glared from red banners hanging off sharpened shafts.

"I don't..."

"The Joker," Superman dropped him. "He killed my family." Eyes glowed red, lips curled, and hands folded into fist. "That mad man killed the woman I loved, my son, and destroyed all of Metropolis. All because you didn't end his miserable life when you had the chance."

"It..."

"It wasn't you," he finished for him. "But tell me, Bruce, have you killed your world's Joker? Is that the difference between our universes? Have you saved my family? Have you killed that monster?"

Silence.

Eyes hard. Unforgiving. "Just like him." Head tilted. "Except you don't have the kryptonite stimulants." Hand seized Bruce's jaw. Dragged in painfully to his feet. "You're as fragile, as helpless, as any normal human."

He didn't feel the blow. Just the blood. Hot and sticky, it splashed across his chin as he fell. His whole world retreating into the safe black familiarity of unconsciousness.

He woke aloft. Hanging from his wrists. Muscles twisted, throbbing, aching.

His fingers were numb. Whether it was from the cold air, the tight hold of his restraints on his wrist, or the amount of time they had been held above his head was unclear. It didn't matter. They were too stiff, too clumsy, to be put to work breaking his bindings.

He doubted he would get far even if he could.

Time blurred.

The room was dark save for a tiny glow embedded in the core of the crystalline structure. Silent but for the ragged, broken, sound of his own pained breathing.

His stomach reminded him that it had not been sated. His mouth impossibly dry. His injuries a brain numbing pain he could never quite escape.

He woke with a start having not remembered falling asleep. Gritted his teeth against the sickening swirl of hunger, thirst, and mind numbing pain. But he could work through the pain. He could work through the hunger. He could work through the thirst... he needed to escape.

Needed to find Joker. Needed to find this world's Batman. Needed to stop this madness. But how? Without his cowl and belt he had no access to the data files needed to hack the fortress. Nor could he understand the language well enough to begin to deconstruct it himself. That was assuming he could break out of his cuffs and walk.

Time passed.

His suit had been scanned. All gadgets removed.

Pain dulled.

Light spilt.

Too bright.

He sucked in a pained breath of air, narrowed his eyes, and glared at the figure that floated into the room. Red billowed from square shoulders.

"Did you follow your Joker to this world?"

Bruce remained silent. He needed more information. Needed to know the stakes.

"I won't ask again."

He couldn't give Superman knowledge. Not until he knew what was important. Not until he learnt what was secret.

The other man's eyes flashed red and Bruce felt the skin on the palm of his hand heat, pucker, and burn. The smell of burnt flesh filled the air. He twisted, cried out, and gagged. Didn't say a word.

"You protect him," Superman spat. "Just like you always did. Why?" Another flash of red. Another mark seared into his skin. He bucked forward with a snarl, reattached his stare onto Superman, and kept his mouth shut.

"He has been seen," Superman continued. Voice trembling with fury. "You can't hide him. You can't keep your precious little monster a secret. The whole of Gotham's underworld is reeling with the news. Their hero has returned!" A third blast of heat vision. A third stripe branded into his hand.

"He killed my family and you bring him here?! You bring him back?!"

"I followed him," Bruce hissed through clenched teeth.

Suddenly Superman was inches away, hand on jaw, dragging Bruce's gaze toward him. "To do what?"

"Take him back."

"So he can kill your world's Lois?"

"To Arkham."

"The revolving doors of Arkham," Superman growled. "When has that hell hole ever held him?"

Silence.

"You're just like him," Superman muttered, "just the same as this world's Batman. Just as guilty." A fist tangled in his hair, yanked his head back, tore his eyes away from Superman. "There is no difference between you two is there? No differences between our universes. It's just it hasn't happened in your world yet. The Joker hasn't killed Lois, destroyed Metropolis, and I haven't stopped crime. I haven't saved the world."

"You're a dictator," Bruce said through clenched teeth as he glared up at the crystals above him. "A tyrant. You rule through fear. You destroy those in opposition. You haven't saved the world," sucked in a sharp breath as the hand in his hair tightened painfully, "you've stolen her freedom."

When Superman spoke again his voice was cold, careful, little more than a whisper. "You'll never understand, Bruce. You'll never see the bigger picture. And I'll never understand you. You should be the only one that does. With what happened to your parents I always thought you would be the first in line. You should have been my greatest ally, my truest most trusted friend, my general... but instead you chose to become my enemy. You betrayed me when I needed you most."

"It wasn't..."

"No, Bruce. It was you. It will be. You haven't done it yet but you will." Bruce felt the heat prickle along his neck, the warmth of a building heat vision, stilled by the touch of a powerful freezing breath. "There is no difference between you and this world's Batman," Superman continued. "Only

time."

"Clark..." the word spilled out of him. Treacherous. Wrong. A lie. But pinned, held, pained his mind had slipt. Had mistaken that familiar voice with that of his friend. Had reached out for the man he wished to be there. Clark. His Clark. His friend. Not this world's monstrous Superman.

Superman let him go and Bruce let his head roll back into a comfortable position before he lifted his eyes back to the Kryptonian floating before him.

"Yes Bruce?" The man asked. Face impassive.

He didn't answer. He didn't have an answer.

Superman's face crumbled into a savage snarl. "You disgust me. You have walked the streets of this world's Gotham. You have seen the news." His voice was dangerously low. "I have created the world you always fought for. A world in which no one has to ever lose their family to crime... and yet you continue to fight me. My best friend. My worst enemy." A hand slid, gentle, slow, down the side of Bruce's face. Tracing the line of his jaw, the shape of the bruises there, and the pucker of his bottom lip. "What can I say that will make you understand? What can I say to make you realise your betrayal? To realise your mistake? What can I say to make you join me in the light?"

"Say this is over," Bruce rasped. "Say you'll give the rule back to the people. Say we're free."

"We're? You don't have to be one of them Bruce. You're one of us."

"I am one of them. I'm not a god. I don't have powers like you."

"That never mattered," Superman said softly. "It never mattered between Lois. Nor should it ever matter between us."

Bruce stiffened as Superman floated closer, his fingers trailed down the side of his neck to gently pluck at the corners of his armour, and his eyes fixed intently onto him.

"It should have been you," Superman continued. "After Lois. It should have been you." Stare

intense, touch tender, closeness aggressively deliberate. "It still could be, Bruce. I'll send Diana away. I'll give you back your position. You could rule at my side."

"You don't want me," Bruce growled. "You want him. Your Batman."

"He's the one that betrayed me," the man continued, unphased. "You," hand slid across muscled shape of his armour. "You never have." He paused, scrutinized Bruce's pale stare, and smiled. A smile so close to Clark's... so close he felt his heart twist.

"Superman..."

"You never will," the alien finished. He leant forward.

A kiss. Unrelenting lips deliberately kind. Coaxing. Fingers soft. Their touch practised. Stimulating. Body firm against his. A rock. A wall. Breath slow.

Bruce felt Superman's tongue slip by his teeth, slide easily into his mouth, and sweep his own tongue up in a dance. Strong hands descended to his hips, rocked him forward, and pressed their groins together. Their chests fit like two pieces of a puzzle.

Superman groaned, wrapped his arms around Bruce, deepened the kiss... and realized Bruce wasn't responding. Realized the stillness to the man he held. The clench of the teeth his tongue was between.

He drew back in a blur of motion and struck Bruce hard enough that his face snapped to the side.

"Whore," Superman hissed. "You fucking whore. You've been begging for it for years. From everyone. Slut."

"I won't, Superman."

"Now it's Superman," he spat. "What happened to Clark?"

"He died," Bruce growled. "The same day Lois did."

Superman exhaled strong enough to smash Bruce into the ice wall behind him. Pain coursed up his spine, flared white hot where his leg fractured, and brought a fresh surge of blood and bile up his throat.

"You don't say her name, whore!"

Bruce spat the blood and sucked in a frantic gasp of air. Felt his gaze start to blur. Swirl. Spot with the reaching tendril of blackness. Of unconsciousness.

"No," again that hand tangled in his hair. Yanked his head up. "You don't get to go. Not yet."

A fist drove into his stomach. Hard enough to push him back into the wall, to push a strangled, pained, cry from him, and to push his mind away from his body. Just for a moment. A quick breather in blackness. And then a shock of cold air to the face and he was back. Back to the pain, back to the swinging shackles, back to the red eyed Superman.

Two beams shot from the Kryptonian and cleanly sliced the bindings that held him aloft. Bruce dropped. Landed on his bad leg. Fell to all fours with a broken gasp.

"Look at you. On your knees." Superman kicked him hard enough to flip him onto his back. "It's what you want, isn't it, whore? To be forced." Another kick. Bruce felt a rib crack. "I can hear your heart beat. This makes you hot?" A foot on his chest. Forcing him flat. Pressed on his newly fractured rib. "This is all I needed to do all these years?" Superman sank down on top of him. Pinned him. Whispered in his ear. "You could have been mine, Bruce. We could have walked out of here hand in hand." He captured both of Bruce's hands under one of his and slid his spare fingers down the side of Bruce's face. "We still can."

It would have been easy. A way out of the pain. A way out of the pain to come. All he had to do was turn his head and kiss those fleeting fingers. To look up at the man who crushed him into the freezing ground and smile. To call him Clark... it wouldn't be that hard. He wore the face. The crest. He spoke with the voice... but he wasn't... he wasn't Clark... Clark would never do this.

Bruce forced his eyes open, forced his lips back, forced his tongue to shape the sounds that gurgled from his throat. "Go... to... hell."

Superman picked him up and slammed him back into the ground. Another rib. Another strangled roar of pain. And then the man was on him again. Indestructible fingers ripped through his armour, scraped again his newly exposed skin, and tossed away chunks of hybrid fabric and chest plates to clatter against the icy floor.

Bruce tensed his muscles, pushed against the impossible force of the man holding him down, and tried to buck him off. He knew it was useless. He knew there was nothing he could do. But he would not lie down and take it. He couldn't. He had to fight. Even if it was hopeless.

Superman's lips curled into an ugly smile as he noticed the movement; noticed the hard line of Bruce's mouth and the change in the bare muscles laced down his chest.

"Fighting me, Bruce?" A horse bark of laughter. "Go ahead. I always imagined it rough with you. It'll just make things all the better."

Mouths crushed together. A kiss so alienated from their previous he could hardly believe it from the same person. Hard. Merciless. An invading tongue forced apart clenched jaw. Unrelenting lips pushed aggressive gaping patterns into the movement of their touch. Teeth sunk hungrily; hard enough to draw blood.

Superman let go of his hands to rip at the remaining armour around his waist. Freed, Bruce twisted suddenly and pushed at Superman's hips aiming to use the alien's extra weight against him. The momentum staggered Superman enough to give him pause.

He laughed. "I can't be thrown," he reminded Bruce. "I can fly." He pushed himself hard back down onto Bruce. Hard enough to knock his wounded leg against the floor. Bruce cried out. "But I guess you had to try."

Last of his armour tossed casually aside. Back pressed into icy floor. Lips forced against his.

Bruce felt himself being folded. Felt those hard, unforgiving, hands seize his thighs and wrap them around rocking hips. Felt first one finger, then another. He arched away from the brutal invasion. Arched into Superman. Then pushed himself roughly away again.

"Such a whore," the man was muttering. "You want it so bad."

Those fingers began to work. Test his walls. The knuckle pressed against the pucker of his muscle, the curve hooked inside him, the movement in time with the roll of Superman's hips. And Bruce felt his own body's traitorous response.

Felt the prickle of blood as it rose to his cheeks, heard the ragged heavy hitch and gasp of his breathing, and saw the hardening of his penis as it rose against the other man's body. Superman floated slightly so he could wrap his second hand around Bruce's shaft and begin pumping it; forcing Bruce's reactions and smirking at his own mouthed arousal.

"Whore."

Bruce clenched his teeth, swallowed the noise that threatened to leak out of him, and glared up at the man now sitting on his hips.

"You're just the same as him," Bruce heard himself rasp.

"Your world's Superman? Does he do this to you?" A savage laugh. "Here I was worried what might happen if he hopped the boarder too. Guess I could just give him you naked and bound."

"No," Bruce spat. "Not him. You're nothing like him."

Head cocked. "Who then?"

"Joker," he replied. "You're just like the Joker."

Eyes darkened, hands froze, muscles clenched. "I'm noth..."

"You're just the same. You kill without remorse. You hurt. You hate. You laugh." He spat blood. "I'm not afraid of you, Superman. You're just another monster."

He expected the blow. Turned into it. Welcomed it. Let the pain flare hot, heavy, unchecked. Let his mind recede from the humiliation of being pinned on the icy floor of the fortress; of being naked, panting, and hard under his enemy's touch; of being raped by a man with a face he so trusted.

He didn't want to be witness to that. He didn't want Clark's face to mean this. He didn't want to look at his friend and only ever remember this. He would much rather drift away. Let his body struggle. Let his mind wonder.

But, like before, Superman had other plans.

"No, Bruce."

Icy air pounded against his face. Fingers snapped closed around his throat. Elbows jabbed deliberately at fractured ribs.

"I don't want you to miss this."

Superman entered him. Forced the head and shaft of his cock into him in a single, agonizing, thrust. Bruce screamed. Struck back against his tormentor with as much force as he could muster. Felt the bones in his hand crack against that godlike jaw.

Superman looked at him in surprise. A flash of startling blue in his eyes as he peered through the skin of the hand. Grunted as he counted the broken bones there.

Began to thrust.

It hurt. Hurt more than it should. Hurt because of his broken bones. His bruised and battered body. And the force the man put behind each targeted roll of his hips. It hurt because of the defeat. The loss of control. And because some part of him still felt a prickling of pleasure. Of need. Of want.

He struggled to stay silent. To stay stiff. To stay cold. Unresponsive. A corpse. Let him be fucking a corpse. A corpse that still pushed at him. Still fought to throw him. God... he couldn't be both.

Superman rocked forward and kissed him.

Lips, teeth, tongue, breath... he kept as still as he could. As hard. Jaw locked closed. Lips pinched.

Breath held.

Fingers returned to the base of his cock. Rolled up and down in time with Superman's beat. Teased. Clapsed. Glided softly over his head. He sucked in a breath. And Superman pushed in his tongue.

And... God... but he couldn't... he couldn't...

Bruce groaned. A single, ugly, sound prolonged by the sudden attentiveness Superman showed him. By the skill of the hand working on his cock, the precision of his thrusts, and touch of teeth down the side of his neck.

Another timed roll of hips, and flex of finger. Bruce bucked forward and moaned. Superman read the signs. Shifted his angle inside him. Pumped him faster.

And Bruce couldn't ignore... couldn't pretend... He was panting. Gasping. Crying out in sheer, undisguised, pleasure. He was struggling, snarling, fighting, but also giving, moaning, and coming. Coming for him.

And he hated it.

Superman suddenly stopped, shuddered, and began pushing into Bruce harder. Faster.

They came together. A chorus of spilt pleasure.

And then they were kissing. Open mouthed. Wolfish. Enemy to enemy. Pouring their tongues into each other, embracing, shoving, hurting, touching.

"You're," Superman gasped between kisses, "good."

Bruce's eyes snapped open. He saw himself. Reflected on a million shards of glass. Tangled, touching, moving with the man who had betrayed him. Who had just raped him. He froze.

"No," Superman growled. "Don't start fighting again." A long tender kiss. Bruce remained stiff.

Cold. "Don't please. It was good. It was better. I won't force you again. I won't. I love you, Bruce. I love this." Another kiss. Desperate. Warm. Open. "God, Bruce, I need this. I need you. I can't keep doing this alone. I can't... I can't bare it... Diana isn't you. She isn't..." Again. Lips together. "Come on. I know you liked it. I know you didn't mean anything you said. I didn't either. Please." Again. And this was the last time. Bruce felt those lips change. Felt the warmth fall away. The desperation melt once more into rage.

Like a pendulum. He swung. Lost to the tide of his madness.

Superman withdrew, eyes glowing red, jaw clenched. "Fine." His eyes blazed. Bruce bucked, roared with pain, sucked in a mouthful of air. Air that tasted of burnt flesh. "But you won't forget." He removed himself in a blur of movement.

Bruce stared up at the ceiling. At the reflection of himself. At the raw red brand of Superman's shield imprinted into his flesh. Across his cheek. Low. The corner would be visible even if he wore the cowl. An ugly signature, a token of his humiliation, a savage parting gift designed to stamp his identity, to cripple him as batman, and to last forever.

Superman floated in the air. Looking down at him with cool disdain. A pair of androids floated up to him and tipped themselves in elegant bows.

"Clean him up, care to his injuries, and get him back into his armour. We'll execute him tomorrow."

Spoken together. "Yes master."

Chapter 2

Superman stood beside the table and stared unseeing down at the tangle of maps, reports, and unsigned documents. At the hologram readouts, the satellite images, and flickering news headlines all screaming the same surreal message. He saw none of it.

He saw only Bruce.

Pushing, writhing, snarling... gasping, moaning, clutching... coming... Bruce.

Superman growled and resolutely fixed his gaze onto the proposal in front of him. Tried to make sense of the stacked text. Of the basic block-like letters. Of the clumped and repetitive wording.

Thought only of the bunch of the man's muscles as they moved against him... with him... then against him again. Thought of the clench of Bruce's teeth and the stiffness of his jaw... how that had changed with a sharp intake of breath... how Bruce in that moment had forgotten to fight him and instead responded.

Loved him.

Superman's fist closed around the edge of the table. Gripped the simple metal between palm and fingertip. Felt it bend, buckle, and break into his hand.

Fragile... so fragile...

"Superman."

Superman turned slowly.

Wonder Woman strode towards him. Her uniform had been discarded; replaced by a red silk dress that hung proactively low off her hips and wrapped in long delicate coils around full breasts. Her hair was free of its normal war braids and her lasso coiled lazily around one arm. Her eyes were dark with fury. "We're all waiting for you."

Two ribs, his leg in two places, hip bone bruised, twelve bones in his hand...

"I'll be there when I'm finished," he muttered.

Ribs would take four weeks of healing time. Fingers four to six. The leg could take up to twenty four.

"This is your plan," she snapped. "And you're undermining it."

The burns. A series of small marks on his hand and the... the brand... on his cheek...

"The execution is today," Diana continued. "You need to move the prisoner."

They would last forever...

"Superman?"

No. He got what he deserved.

Bruce wanted him. Wanted *it*. He got what he deserved for pretending otherwise; pretending he didn't know it was right, pretending he didn't share that hunger... that need... pretending he didn't care...

Pretending he didn't love him.

It was the other Batman. This world's Batman. Somehow he'd already gotten to Bruce. Somehow he'd already corrupted him, poisoned him, turned this new Bruce against him. Just as he was slowly trying to turn the whole world against him. And now he was out there, somewhere, in a computer filled cave laughing at him.

"Superman!"

Wonder Woman grabbed his shoulder and spun him around to face her. "The trap has already been set," she snapped. "We need the bait. We need the double. Where is he?"

The lasso looped across the palm of her hand scraped his shoulder. Flared bright enough to shine off the crystalline surface of the walls.

"...Batman..." Superman muttered. "... he has done this somehow... and... I burnt him... I didn't mean... no... he deserved it... he's just the same... the same as the other one..."

"What?"

"Bruce. The double. I burnt him."

"So?"

"On the cheek."

She scrutinized him for a moment. Eyes narrowed, lips curled, and breathing deliberately slow, measured. "You're worried the press will ask questions," she concluded. "I'll tell the camera men to only show him from his good side." She shook her head. "Did he reveal anything?"

He stared at her. "What?"

Again her eyes narrowed. "In the interrogation. Did he reveal anything?"

"I..." the lasso still touched him. The effects were muted through the uniform and because it wasn't wrapped around him. But it touched him all the same. Did she know? Was this a deliberate ploy? Was she pressing him for information?

Fury uncoiled inside him. Thick, clumped, misshapen. He shoved her back. Hard enough for her to stumble. Fast enough for her heels to tangle in the hem of her ridiculous dress.

She fell. Stared up at him in shock.

"Don't touch me," he snapped. Glared down at her exposed skin, the bare muscles laced down her abdomen, and the swell of her barely concealed breasts. What had so recently seemed alluring now looked grotesque. Deformed. "And get some clothes on," he added.

Her eyes widened, her lips peeled back, and her lasso snapped into her hands. She flew off the ground in a flurry of skirts, skin, and hair.

"After everything I have done for you this is how you repay me? I held Lois for you Superman! I held her and took care of her while you took care of the world! I buried her!" Her lasso snapped forth to tighten around his neck. A constricting coil suddenly blazing gold. "And this is how you repay me?"

"Get off me!"

"Why? So you can ignore me, lie to me, and push me even further away? I love you, Superman. Why can't you see that?"

He glared at her. Felt the prickle of heat stain his iris red.

"Fine," she hissed, "burn me. Kill me. See if you can manage this world without me. See if you can manage this league without me!" She twisted the lasso around her wrist, pulled it tight. "They talk about you, Superman. Whisper off world where even you can't hear. They think you're losing it. Going mad."

"It's Batman," Superman said. "He's the one. He's the one putting these ideas into everyone's heads. Turning everyone against me."

"Batman?" She sneered. "You want to stop Batman but you won't even get your little Bat-double down to Gotham to set up this trap. This trap which might, if it works, renew the faith the others have in you. This trap that could stop this pointless war. Why?"

"I burnt him."

"I already told you it doesn't matter!"

"I broke him."

She paused. Floating before him, holding him on the end of her lasso, and glaring down through her thick tangle of hair. "He was already wounded."

"I broke some ribs." Superman confessed. "His hand. I think I made his leg worse. It was already fractured but it may now be broken."

"But he is intact?" She pressed. "Conscious? Breathing?"

"Yes."

"Then what is the problem?"

"I don't want to kill him," he said. A truth. A truth he'd been hiding from himself. A truth now brutally, painfully, exposed.

Eyes flashed. "What?"

"I want... it's not his fault. He doesn't know this world. Our world. All he knows is the lies Batman has fed him."

Diana's face was incredulous. "He is the same man. He'll betray you just like the other one. Hurt you." She drifted closer. "I picked up the pieces last time, Superman."

"No, no," he was shaking his head. Clawing at the golden rope around his neck. Desperate to stop the torrent of truth that began spilling from his lips. Floating away from her even as she approached. "You don't understand. He responded. Just for a moment. I just need to show him. Force him to see..." His fingers found their way under the lasso and he pulled it over his head. Diana tugged it so it closed around his wrist. Gaze critical. Analysing.

"Go on."

"Think what it would be like to have a Batman again," Superman tried instead. "He could manage everything you do now. You wouldn't have to look after the League anymore. You wouldn't have to command the armies."

An ugly, stagnant, pause.

"You would make him your second," she deduced. Voice tight. Controlled. "After everything?"

He pulled the lasso off his wrist and let it drop to swing back towards her. It hung, still and silent. Its duty already painfully fulfilled.

"No," he lied. "I wouldn't."

"You would!" She screamed. "After everything he's done to you! After everything I've done! You would turn me out! For him? Why?!"

He glared at her.

She hovered before him. Dress hung dank and damp at the hem. Eyes cold. Dark. Penetrating.

"You fucked him didn't you?"

His eyes flashed. "No."

Her wrist moved. Lasso coiled.

Superman exhaled. Hard.

Wonder Woman let out a shrill scream as she was thrown back. Body collided with crystalline walls, hair and skirts tangled around writhing form, and lasso slumped empty to the ground.

In a flash he was upon her. Holding her. Pinning her into the wall.

"You think I'm lying? You would use that thing on me? Against me?" His anger swelled. An ugly, frothing, flavour staining his words. "You would betray me?"

"If I look at him," she hissed, "those broken bones... that burn... what would it look like? A torturer's stamp? A lover's mark?" Gaze black. "Both?"

He glared at her. "You don't understand."

"No," she said. Voice trembled. Broke. "I don't. Why, Superman?" A shuddering angry gasp. "I love you. More than anything. I... I know you never loved me like you loved Lois. But that was okay. It was okay b-because I knew... I thought..." tears spilt down her cheeks. Fat. Ugly. Messy. "Why? Why him? Why did you have to fucking fuck him?!"

The question hung. Unavoidable. Unanswerable.

She swallowed a cry, wrapped her arms around him, and buried her face in his neck. Slowly he shifted so he was no longer pinning her against the wall. No longer pushing her away.

Together, they floated, a practiced embrace holding them together. Bodies together, limbs entwined, and eyes apart.

Time melted away in cold, heavy, seconds. Like drops of water from a broken tap.

"Don't do this," she said after a time. "Don't."

He sighed.

"I know him, Superman," she continued. "And I know you." She lifted her head off his shoulder and looked into his eyes. "Don't do this," she whispered. Voice fragile. Desperate. "He'll never follow you willingly. He'll always be your prisoner. You know this. You know he'll never give in." A

quivering pause. "We'll use him to capture the real Batman just like you planned. We'll end this war."

He didn't respond.

"Once Batman is destroyed we'll have won," she whispered. "We'll finally have created the perfect world." She touched the side of his face. "We're so close." A soft, careful, smile. "Don't do this, Superman. Not now. Not when we're so close." She leant forward.

He accepted the kiss. Accepted the warm, wet, press of her lips and the heave of her breasts against his chest. Accepted the touch of tongue, the gentle nibble of teeth, and the tentative exploration of her hands.

It was nothing... she was nothing... nothing like Bruce. Bruce was hot, heavy, intoxicating. Dark. Daring. Dangerous.

And he wanted... needed... that taste. To touch it, sink into it, drown in it... He'd always known the man was addictive. Had seen it in the flushed, desperate, faces of the women Batman had courted as playboy billionaire. Had heard it in those girls' fluttering heartbeats as he'd captured their mouths in heavy, hungry, kisses. He'd known it when he first slid fingers down Bruce's cheek and felt his own skin come alive at the touch. But this... Wonder Woman... she was nothing. Could be nothing. Beside him.

But Bruce had denied him. Refused him.

Superman swallowed the anger that threatened at the thought. He wouldn't. He couldn't. Not forever. He would have to submit. He would have to realise his mistake. He would love him.

Diana drew back. Her eyes were wide, rimmed red, and half hidden behind a thick tangle of black hair. "Please... don't..."

"I need to fly for a bit."

She didn't respond.

He gently untangled himself from her, avoided the hollow hurt look that flowed from her eyes, and left.

The sky around the fortress seemed like a painted set. Blue with lumbering fat clouds, a distant white washed horizon, and the single solid circle that was the sun poised directly overhead.

Nearby, both the Yellow Lantern's hovered. Spoke a strange language he didn't understand. Stopped when they saw his approach. He glared resolutely forward and shot by them before they could hail him.

He could hardly think. Hardly breathe.

How could she? How could she betray him like this? How could she reach under his skin, wrestle the truth out of him, and lay it out before him in stark and bloody nakedness?

He slid around the globe along a routine route, listened to the calming drone of the human voices below, and looked up at the Watchtower still glaring down at the globe as if it were a threat.

But it wasn't. He'd saved it. He'd removed crime. Removed super villains. Removed everything evil and left only the pristine blue and green planet below. A perfect world.

Superman closed his eyes and let himself drift. Let Earth's gravity carry him gently around the globe. Let the distant voices below blur into one constant noise. Like the waves on a beach. Rising and falling.

Bruce had denied him. Turned away. Refused him.

He gritted his teeth and rolled to face the sun. Let the touch of her light send a welcoming prickle of power through his skin.

It didn't matter, he reasoned. He wanted Bruce. Wanted to touch him, hold him, and taste him with the freedom of a lover. And Bruce wanted it too. Despite himself he'd wanted it as much as Superman.

God, but he wished Bruce hadn't fought him. Wished he'd admitted everything, wrapped his arms around him, and loved him like he should. He wished he had nothing to do with the Joker, with the other Batman, with this whole mess... he wished it was simple. Honest. Like it should be.

Why did he resist? It was Batman. All Batman. He must have recruited Bruce. Must have planned this. Set him up. There was a greater plan at work here. Batman's plan. A plan to destroy him. To ruin him. To ruin him by tricking him into killing Bruce.

Yes... yes that made sense.

The Joker was back. Working with Batman. He knew that. He'd heard the rumours floating across the Gotham city underground. And it was Joker who had killed Lois. It was Joker who had destroyed his family. By tricking him. Using him.... And he was doing it again.

Bruce had said he'd followed the Joker. Again, he knew that. The police had footage. Had seen Joker and Batman fighting... but it hadn't been Batman... it had been Bruce. Joker and Batman had set him up. Set up to be captured. To be killed.

Batman wouldn't come. He wouldn't save Bruce. He would let the execution go ahead. And then Superman would once again be killing the person he loved. That was his plan. That was his betrayal.

"Superman!" A voice almost lost in the mumble of the world. "Superman!" he rolled. Peered down at the globe. Tried to pick apart the millions of people he saw scattered across Earth's speckled skin.

Hawkgirl hovered. Bloody. Battered. "Superman!"

He bolted back down towards her.

"Superman," she gasped as he appeared. "Aquaman is attacking the island."

"What?"

"Can't you hear it?" She panted. "Aquaman, the double, is attacking the island where we're meant to hold the execution." Nervously she added. "Is the Batman double even there? Have you taken him

down yet?"

He could hear it. He could hear the gunfire. The screams. The roar of deep sea monsters as they pulled their bodies out of the water.

"No," he shook his head. "It's just a decoy. They're not planning on saving him."

Her eyes widened. "What? H-how do you know?"

Rage flared hot and heavy in his gut. "It's obvious!" He yelled. "Why would they let us capture him? It's part of his plan. It's all part of his plan."

"But... they're already attacking... we could... Batman is surely already engaged somehow. If we can find him..."

"No. He won't come. I just told you. I've figured it out. I know his plan."

"We know they have a Wonder Woman and a Green Lantern," she tried instead. "We need reinforcements."

"No!" His voice blew strong enough to push her back through the air with a yelp of surprise. "I told you it's a decoy! They won't come!"

"Please, Superman," she cried, her wings beating furiously to stabilize herself. "Without the double Batman they'll soon hack into our systems and find he isn't there and leave. We'll lose our chance to get Batman. We'll lose our chance to end this."

He snarled at her and flew away.

"It won't take them long," she said after him. "I-I think they have a Cyborg."

Stupid. How could she be so stupid? Didn't she realise? It was all a front. A lie. It was obvious now. How could he not have realised it earlier? Batman always had a strange relationship with the Joker.

And now they were teamed against him. They must be.

But he wouldn't fall for it. Even if Hawkgirl had. Even if Wonder Woman had. Even if the rest of the League had. Not this time. He wouldn't let his enemies trick him into destroying what was his. Not again. Never again.

He had to kill Bruce.

Kill Bruce and they would think it all over.

Kill Bruce and they would stop looking.

Kill Bruce and he would be his. Forever.

He needed to fake the execution.

He snaked around the globe, towards her white crown, and dropped into the fortress. Light gleamed. Cool. Calm. Emblazed with his crest and adorned with flickering memories of Krypton. Flash and Shazam were there.

"You," he barked at the pair. They jumped. Turned toward him. "I need to fake this execution. Get a camera and someone who looks like Bruce Wayne."

They stared at him as if he'd grown wings. "But..."

"Now!"

He turned and flew deeper into the fortress without looking to see if they obeyed him. Flew through a series of opening and closing doors until he reached where Bruce was being held.

The door recognized him. Moved aside. And there was Bruce. Bound in his shackles. Hanging. Waiting for death.

The man looked up.

A series of scabbing bite marks framed his lips, snaked along his jawbone, and slipped down his neck. A line of bruises began at his throat, marched remorselessly across his chin, and climaxed with the clear imprint of fingers across his cheek. A merciful white bandage covered his lower right cheek. Covered the brand.

Despite himself, Superman felt a hot flush of desire as he saw the bunched muscles, square jaw, and shaped features of the man bound before him. Couldn't help but suck in a slow shudder as he heard Bruce's own heart thud a fraction faster.

"Bruce..."

His eyes were cold, penetrating, unforgiving. His mouth was still. Silent.

"I've figured it out," he began. "Joker and Batman are working together. Working against me. Against you."

Unmoving. Unblinking. Accusing.

"I don't know what he told you, Bruce, about me but it isn't true. I'll fly you up. I'll show you. I'll show you how peaceful everything is. How much better we've made it. You'll understand once I show you."

Silent. Staring. Still.

"I'm not going to hurt you. It's just what he wants. Don't you see?" He smiled. Forced himself to drift closer. Closer to that stare. Closer to that hatred. "I was wrong. You're nothing like him. You're the Batman I always should have shared a world with."

Unreadable.

"I'm so sorry, Bruce," Superman whispered. "You know I am. But I didn't know. I hadn't realised." He shook his head and reached out to touch him.

Bruce jerked his head back. Pulled away from him. Denied him.

"It'll be better now. I promise. You'll understand. Once I show you. Once I explain." He reached out again.

"Don't touch me."

The command was coarse, sharp, dangerous. A threat. Superman felt his anger return. Felt the trickle of heat snake across his iris. The tensing of his muscles. How could he be so cold? How could he be so dismissive? After all they'd shared? Even as he tried to explain?

"I'm saving you," he growled. "Just like I'm saving this world. And just like this world you might not like all of it... but you'll come to thank me in the end."

He tore Bruce from his bindings and pulled him into the middle of the room. Pushed him roughly down onto his knees. The man grunted in pain as his weight rolled onto his leg.

"Get your armour off."

Glare sharp.

"I'm not going to touch you," Superman heard himself explain. "I need it."

Unwavering.

"I'll rip it off you."

"I know."

Superman's hands curled into fists. "Don't pretend you don't understand, Bruce. I... I didn't mean to hurt you. You know that."

The look Bruce returned to him was cold. So cold it burnt.

Superman grabbed his collar and pulled him aloft with a snarl. "You know that! Don't pretend you don't!"

"I said no," Bruce said slowly, "and you hurt me."

"It wasn't like that."

Teeth bared. "You raped me."

"You wanted it," Superman spat. "You still want it. That's why you're pushing me now. Teasing me. You know I'm right. About everything."

Hate unflinching. "You're mad."

Superman pulled the man against him, clenched a fist in his hair, and pulled his head back. Exposed bruised and bitten throat, scarred lips, and... the bandage fell away. His signature stared back at him. An ugly, puckered, scar branded onto the perfect lines of his cheek.

But Bruce had deserved it. He deserved to wear it now. He was lying. Pretending. Hating.

Superman slid his thumb roughly across that wound. Bruce flinched. "Why do you pretend when it hurts you? Why can't you just tell the truth? Why can't you just..." he leant forward and pushed a kiss onto the man's lips.

He resisted. Lips taunt. Jaw closed. Muscles bunched against him. But it didn't matter. He would stop. He would kiss him back. Just like last time. He would forget the lies the other Batman had said... he would respond...

He tilted his head and deepened the kiss. Forced apart those jaws and let his tongue dance smoothly along the other man's teeth. Let the taste of the man... this man... fill him. Embrace him. Threaten to drown him...

"Superman?"

He jerked back. Turned.

Flash stood in the doorway with a film camera tucked under one arm. He stared at them. "I... um... I bought this... Diana said to tell you the fight was going badly. They need your help." Nervously. "She found... she thinks Batman may have already come and gone."

He swallowed an angry retort. Flash wouldn't understand. None of them understood. "I asked for a lookalike."

"I... well... we were confused by that order, Superman."

His eyes flashed red. Voice level. Hard. "How was that order confusing, Flash?"

"It... why would you need a lookalike? I thought you were going to execute this batman. He looks more like Bruce Wayne..."

"I need evidence," Superman snapped. "Evidence the execution went ahead as planned."

Flash stared at him. Uncomprehending.

Superman sighed. "We'll have some close ups of him," he jerked his head toward Bruce, "and everything else with the lookalike. We also need the body as proof. It doesn't have to be exact. Just height, weight, colouring... we'll use a soft focus and long shots."

"But..." The speedsters eyes flicked unnervingly fast between Bruce and Superman. "An innocent man?"

Superman glared at him. "If you find one among the surviving criminals questions will be asked." He spoke slowly, clearly, carefully. A teacher talking to a particularly stupid child. "No one will suspect if a farmer or labourer goes missing. We'll find an excuse. An accident."

"I... I don't know where..."

"You're the fastest man alive! You don't need to hold auditions!"

Shazam appeared behind Flash, brow puckered, and hands toying with the hem of his robe. The boy looked out of those aged eyes. The boy with the Wisdom of Solomon.

"Superman, this isn't right. We can't just kill an innocent man."

Superman fixed him with a cold, resolute, stare. "Why not? Think of all the innocent lives we've saved so far."

The boy stepped forward. "That doesn't give you the righ--!"

Superman killed him.

He looked at the boy's furrowed forehead and sent twin beams of heat vision carefully through his skull. Flash stared, open mouthed, frozen. Bruce bucked forward with an angry cry. Shazam stood for a moment. Two lines of blood ran down his forehead, spilled over his eyes, and dripped onto his uniform. Red on red.

And then he fell. Silently. Simply. Over onto his back.

Superman looked at him for a moment. It was strange, he decided. He'd guessed the boy would phase back once dead.

"Get me a lookalike, Flash," he spoke carefully. Quiet. Powerful. "Now."

The man vanished.

He turned back to Bruce. Back to those eyes. To that stare.

He sighed and rubbed his temple. "Don't look at me like that, Bruce. You don't understand."

"What don't I understand?" Bruce snarled. "Explain it to me now. What is it I am getting so dreadfully mixed up?"

"It's better this way. The wor--"

"You don't deser--"

Superman struck him. Dropped him. "Shut up! Shut up or I'll put another one on the other cheek!"

Bruce turned slowly back to him. Pinned him under his cold glare.

"You..." Superman sighed. "I want you, Bruce. I want you by my side. You're making it so hard... so hard on both of us." He drifted down. Knelt on the ice beside the man. "But I won't... I can't just give up on you... I love you. I won't give up on that." A small, soft, smile. "You might not see it yet but I'll help you, I'll show you, and you'll see..." he took Bruce's good hand in his; held it as Bruce tried to pull away, "you'll love me too."

Bruce's response was instant. "I will *never* love you."

Chapter 3

Batman watched the footage on automatic repeat. Watched Superman drag the Batman double up onto a podium, knock him down to his knees, and slice through his skull with twin blasts of heat vision. A small, brutal, moment to end a life.

It didn't make sense.

There was no benefit in killing the double Batman. None. Just as there had been no advantage to leaving his trap unbaited. He let them attack, infiltrate, and escape from an empty prison. Why? There was nothing to be won for either side. There was nothing to be gained in killing the other world's Batman... but he had.

Was this madness? Had Superman finally lost himself to his revenge, finally forgone his pretence of a benign dictator, and killed not for a better world but for himself? Batman hugged his cape around his shoulders. The thought chilled him. Terrified him. If Superman had crossed that line then no one was safe. If he was willing to kill an innocent man not for a greater goal, not in an attempt to capture him, but purely as revenge... there was nothing he would not be capable of.

Green Arrow stood in the corner of the compact cave and stared, face ashen, at the screen. "I... I can't believe he's dead."

Batman didn't respond. Watched the man in the reflection on the monitor.

"He was," Arrow continued, "just like you. I guess that's obvious. But... he was."

He rolled a single arrow nervously across his palm, toyed with the sharpened head and picked mindlessly at a small imperfection his fingertips found in the shaft.

"He... was my friend. Never the kind you could share a drink with or talk with but..." the man stopped. Swallowed. "You know..."

Batman waited.

"But he was Batman, you know? Batman. I never thought he would actually die. Batman doesn't die. Even when he was captured I felt sure we would get him out. That this whole plan would work. And when he wasn't there I thought maybe he'd got out himself somehow. I felt sure that we'd come back to the cave and he'd be waiting, an impervious weapon hanging from his belt, and a perfect plan on his mind." A small, grieved, smile. "I didn't think... Batman could die."

A pregnant pause. Batman kept his body stiff. Still. Unreadable. Arrow looked aside and chewed through his words. Chewed slowly through his grief.

"And I didn't think Supes would actually do it, you know. He looks just like the one from our world. Sounds just like him. I didn't think he could..."

The video looped again. Red flashed. Body slumped. Blood dripped on bat branded armour.

"We've got to get him," Arrow said. "We can't just... let him do this." Voice dropped. Hardened. "We can't just let him get away with this."

The declaration rang loud in the confined cave. The truth of it blantly clear. Previously Green Arrow had given his aid to this world out of a sense of justice and duty. He was a hero. It was his job. Now, that had changed. Now it was personal. Batman had no doubt the man's feelings would be reflective of all the doubles. It wasn't about justice anymore; it was about revenge. In the end, justice always died under the weight of revenge. Morality always withered in the pressence of pain. In the end... he looked up at the image of Superman... no one stayed a good guy.

Batman sighed. Hit the pause. Threw the cowl off his face. "I know."

"You," Arrow hesitated, "you talked about the kryptonite weapon before."

A curt nod. "I did."

"Will it?"

"No," Batman rubbed a gloved hand against his face. "It won't kill him. But it's risky. One shot. I don't have enough to reload. And once that shot is used we need to act quickly to restrain him. Even if we ignore the other League members that becomes tricky. He is still formidable even weakened and without most of his powers."

The doors swung open. Banged loudly against cave walls. "So you're telling me it's hopeless!" The other world's Aquaman marched in. His scale armour glinted savagely in the electronic light. Fist clenched around sharpened trident. "That monster murdered *our* Batman for *your* crimes and you can't even get off your arse long enough to do something about it!"

Batman glared at him. "You were eavesdropping."

"Superman isn't the only one with super hearing," Aquaman snarled.

Batman scowled and turned back to the computer. Stared at the still frame on the screen before him. Superman was caught shoving the other world batman onto his knees. The shot was out of focus, wide, but the glaring bat symbol on the chest of the armour was all too familiar.

"Arrow's right," Aquaman said. "This may not be our world and he may not be our problem but Bruce was one of ours. That makes this personal. He needs to be stopped."

He hit play. Twin beams of heat vision. Blood on black.

"We played his game last time and Bruce paid the price," Aquaman continued. "I won't let that happen again. This time we set the rules. This time it'll be on our ground. Our plan. Our trap."

Green Arrow was nodding.

Video rolled onto repeat.

"We lure him out of his fortress, use this weapon against him, and work together to bring him down." A cold look. "If it proves too difficult we'll need to kill him while he's weakened."

Red eyes. Red blood.

"He knows we have kryptonite," Batman reminded them. "He won't come alone. Nor unprepared."

"We defeated his allies before," Aquaman said darkly. "We can do it again."

Repeat.

"Perhaps."

The body fell forward. Landed in a heap at Superman's feet. Face butchered by the messy blast.

The video started again. Started with a close up of Bruce in profile. Unmistakable. Rolled into the execution. Superman dragged the man up onto a stage, pushed him onto his knees, and killed him. Body fell forward...

"We could let the Joker cause a scene," Arrow speculated. "With their history that should call him down pretty fast. And he probably wouldn't suspect us. We could use the Joker as our bait."

"No." Batman growled.

"It could work," Aquaman challenged.

"You don't know that man like I do," he said. "You don't know what he's capable of."

"No," Aquaman hissed, "I don't. But I do know what that man is capable of." Jabbed the prongs of his trident at the screen. At Superman. "And he needs to be stopped."

Blood on bat symbol.

"You're right," Batman growled. "And we will."

Aquaman's eyes narrowed, fist tightened around trident, muscles bunched. "You say that but you do not act," the Atlantean said. "He wouldn't have just sat here!" Shout echoed. "If it had been you he wouldn't have let it go unpunished."

"I won't," Batman growled. "You know that."

Teeth bared. "Do I?"

"Joker might be a stupid idea anyway," Green Arrow muttered. "This video was aired everywhere. The whole world knows Superman killed Batman. He'd probably shake the guy's hand rather than help us."

Batman didn't correct the assumption. Watched his own face caught in stark profile. Watched his old friend's eyes blaze. Watched his double die.

It didn't make sense.

Superman killed. He'd killed this world's Joker and a lot more besides. But it was always with reason. Purpose. His purpose. This... this was senseless slaughter. This had no place in his purpose. There had to be something else. Something he was missing. There had to be. Every sense in his body told him so. But all he could see was murder. No hidden message. No bait. No trap. No goal.

"Will you turn that off?" Aquaman said. "I've seen it enough."

"I haven't," Batman growled.

"Why? What else is there to see?"

"Something else," Batman replied. There has to be something else. Something he was missing. Something here. There had to be...

Aquaman grabbed him by the edge of his cape, pulled him violently away from the monitor, and slammed him into the wall of the cave. "That's my friend on that screen! You may not care! But I do!" Eyes narrowed. "You may wear his face. His symbol. But you never knew him. You're not watching your friend get killed over and over again. We are!"

"Arthur!" Arrow grabbed the Atlanian's arm. "This isn't the time."

"Yeah, and he isn't Batman," Aquaman snarled. Dropped him. "Batman wouldn't do this."

It was rage, Batman reasoned as he slowly picked himself up. The second stage of grief. The first stage was denial. He glanced at the screen again and felt the cold lump of that clinical denial well up against him. Force him to keep searching despite having seen the whole video countless times, frame by frame.

He didn't mourn the loss of the other Batman as the others did. He didn't grieve for his double. It was Superman. It was the last shred of humanity to his old friend torn away from the monster he'd become. He mourned the death of his Clark...

It had been years now. Years since Superman had driven a fist through Joker's chest. Years since he'd announced himself leader of the planet. Years since he'd last stood beside him as an ally... but never... never had he done something like this... so pointless... so mindless... so evil...

It didn't make sense.

There had to be something else. A missing factor. A missing link. Something that would make everything else fall into place.

"Batman." Arrow approached him, laid a careful hand on his shoulder. "You know he doesn't mean it, right? He's just angry. Upset. We... we all are."

"I know."

The archer nodded. "Yeah... Look. I know you don't want to but we need that kryptonite weapon. It's... it's more than just doing the right thing now. You understand that, right?"

Batman shrugged him off. Returned to his computer. "I understand," he snapped. "You don't. They know which doubles we have now. They'll match you with this world's versions of you and then more." A glare at Aquaman. "You did well when they didn't expect you but now they have seen what you can do. They've taken numbers. As we are, if you attack him, you're signing your own death warrant."

"Give us the weapon."

"That weapon is my one chance to take down Superman!" Batman snarled. "I'm not going to let you waste it on some stupid plan to attack him head on."

"What else should we do?! Sit here and do nothing?"

"For now. We need to plan. To figure this out. We still have assets. We still have allies. Luthor, Deathstroke, Harley..."

"Criminals," Aquaman added bitterly. "How can you trust them?"

"They never betrayed what they stood for! They may be criminals but at least they're honest. At least I can trust them to do, to be, what they've always been. They're my team now. And prior to your League falling into our realm we were alone."

A moment of bitter silence. Arrow's eyes flicked nervously from Batman to Aquaman.

"So you want us to leave, is that is?" Aquaman snapped. "You think we're a danger?" He snorted. "We're the only hope you have of ever saving this world. Your little friendship group of super criminals has had years to defeat him and you haven't left as much as a scratch. Now it's our turn!"

"Shut up, Arthur," Arrow muttered, "just shut up."

Batman shook aside the sting of truth those words brought and pulled his cowl back over his face. He was right. Aquaman was right. Despite himself, despite everything, he'd failed. He'd failed to save the world. He'd failed to stop this tyrant. He'd failed his friend... Clark... gone. Eaten away by the monstrous Superman. All because he couldn't stop Joker, all because he hadn't figured out Joker's plan in time...

"I'm going out," he informed the pair.

Arrow nodded. Aquaman glared. "Fine."

He left. The paused video glared down into the darkness of the cave.

The hallways beyond was desolate. A long narrow stretch pocked with a series of doors leading into other sections of the underground network of caves. Weapons and supplies were stacked against the wall. Lights low, dim.

He'd failed. Just like he'd failed his parents on Crime Alley, just like he'd failed Dick and Damian, just like he'd failed Superman... he'd failed to save Bruce, he'd failed to stop this mad twisted world from being created, and now he was failing the doubles. Failing to be the Batman they needed in the wake of what had happened.

He pushed open a door into another hallway, this one tunneled through the rock of the cave.

Instantly Harley was upon him. "B-man!" She jogged to match his pace. "I knew you were okay! Mr. J said you would be. He said you've got to be blind to think you'd been the one that copped the blast. Blind as a bat in one eye and can't see out of the other!" A shrill giggle. "I missed his jokes."

Batman didn't turn to look at her or slow his unforgiving pace. "I told you not to talk to him, Harleen."

"Oh, it's okay," she waved his words away. "I know all his tricks now. If anyone is safe from him it's me. Besides, he's been awesome for recruitment. A whole group of the clown gang has come back wearing their old masks again. Bobo, Bob, and Yonkes...." She sighed. "It's just like the good old days again. Back when you used to chase us around." A distant smile. "He's real inspirational."

"We don't need more thugs."

"You always say that," she pouted, "but what happens when all your new super friends go back to their world again? We may not have super powers but this is our world. We'll fight for it like... like... we'll fight really hard. Get it."

Batman frowned. Considering. "How did he know it wasn't me?"

"Huh?"

He stopped. Turned to her. "How did he know it wasn't me who died?"

"Oh... well... um..."

"He doesn't know me. I'm not *his* Batman. He isn't *my* Joker." Batman's glare sharpened. "How Harleen?"

"Yeah... he's really smart and..."

"How?"

She jerked her head up, planted two fists on her hips, and returned his glare. "There you go again. Being such a big bat bully. I'm just trying to talk to you and you yell at me, ask impossible questions, and tell me my old friends don't have a place here. Now, that isn't very nice, B-man."

Batman turned. Strode back the way he'd come. Back towards the prison cells.

"Wait! Where are you going?!" She ran in front of him. "Don't go down there."

He pushed her wordlessly aside.

"Hey!" She clung to his arm. "Look. Okay. I'm sorry. He isn't down there."

Batman stopped. Glared at her.

"I let him out, okay," she confessed. "Some people thought we'd all made it up. That he wasn't back from the dead... and besides. What harm can he do anyway?"

"What harm can he do?" Batman shoved her. "What harm? He did this, Harley! All of this! It's because of him Superman's armies now march through the streets of Gotham! It's because of him that our world is like this!" Through gritted teeth. "It is because of him that my son is dead."

The woman stared at him, blue eyes wide, and arms thrown haphazardly wide. Mouth opened, closed, and opened again. Fingers flexed around invisible weapons.

"It wasn't!" She finally screeched. "Your boy blunders killed each other! Everyone knows that!"

He stood a step towards her.

She squealed and scampered back. "Hey! Don't be mean!"

"Don't ever talk about my family like that, Harleen," he snarled. "Ever."

"Why? It's the truth isn't it?" Bottom lip poked out. "More the truth than blaming this mess all on Mr. J. It wasn't even this Mr. J that killed Lois, you know. It was the other one... our one. This one's better. He's good. Funny."

"Batman!" Arrow appeared in the doorway behind him. "You better come look at this."

He glared at Harley. At the sparks of looming madness flashing behind too bright eyes. At the messy black and white makeup. At the jarring red and black colours at war across her costume. How? After everything he'd done how could she keep going back to him?

She poked out her tongue.

"Find him," Batman told her. "Or I will."

"He won't let you find him," she jeered. "He doesn't like you. He likes the other one."

"The other one is dead," Batman snapped.

She stood still a moment, eyes widening, and then grinned. "Oh! It was him that they caught? That makes so much more sense now! Hah! Silly Super-sod has killed the wrong you!" Brows fell. "But...

Mr. J said it wasn't..."

"Batman," Arrow called again. "Seriously, whatever this is it can wait. Cyborg - our Cyborg - just contacted us."

With a snarl Batman spun around and marched back towards the double. Followed him back into the small, computer filled cave. Aquaman leant against a pillar. Eyes cold. Angry. Accusing.

"What is it?" Batman asked, coming to stand in the middle of the room.

"We don't know," Arrow confessed. "He said he was getting strong readings from lower Gotham."

"Reading of what?"

A pause.

"Hell, I don't understand what he says half the time," Arrow confessed.

Aquaman shrugged.

Batman swore under his breath. Strode back to his computer and quickly hacked into the double's intercom link. It wasn't too different from the one he used to use to communicate with the League... Find the code, the frequency, seperate the sources... there.

"Cyborg."

"Batman?!" The voice crackled over the speakers. "You're ali--"

"I'm the other one."

"Oh."

He adjusted the frequency to sharpen the sound. "What's the news?"

"Good if it is what I think it is. Bad if it's anything else."

"What's the good version?"

Cyborg's speaker crackled. Connction poor. "It could be Superman."

Arrow looked up. Aquaman clutched his weapon. Batman stiffened.

"What?"

"I mean *our* Superman. When I left our world he was working on a way through with Flash. We wanted to get all of you back. We didn't realise what a mess it was here..." Static. "...if Flash runs on the treadmill at the right speed he may be able to catapult Superman through. That may be what's happening."

Batman's hand clenched into a fist.

"In which case we may be out of this stinking hellhole sooner rather than later," Cyborg said. "Fuck, I'm sorry, you know what I mean. It's just... well... I'm kinda messed up about what happened to Bats. The real... I mean... our one..."

Batman spoke between clenched teeth. "Is there any way to stop him?"

Aquaman launched himself off the wall and strode across the room. "Stop him? We need him. With him we finally have a real chance at defeating this world's Superman! You said before they had taken stock of us. They won't think we have him."

Arrow's gaze was uncertain. Fixed on Batman.

Cyborg sounded confused. "What? Not really. Why? Will he be in danger?"

"We don't need him," Batman spat. "We have the weapon."

"The weapon you're not using!" Aquaman roared.

"Yet."

Arrow shook his head. "Arthur's right. He could help us, Batman. This is good news. Hell, it's the only good news we've had in a while. We need him."

"He could unite with his double against us," Batman said. "Together they'll destroy us."

Aquaman's face crumbled. "He would never...!"

"He would!" Batman barked. "They're the same! Exactly the same! You don't see it but you're just like we were before this. All of you are just like we used to be before all this happened. There is no difference between our worlds, do you understand? It's just a matter of time."

"That's not..."

"It *is* true." Voice loud. Angry. Caught between a shout and a growl. "You look at your perfect Man of Steel and imagine somehow that it was different for us. You imagine he was somehow different. But he wasn't! He was our hero. He was my friend. He was everyone's friend. He was Superman. He was the good guy. The ultimate good guy." A solid, bitter, bark of laughter. "I didn't think Superman would do what he did. I didn't think he could kill all those people, take over the world, send armies into the cities and tanks into the countryside... but he did. And I don't know what he tells himself to get to sleep at night but I *do* know whatever it is it'll ring like church bells with your bloody double."

Arrow was shaking his head.

Aquaman glared.

Cyborg's comlink eerily silent.

"Where will he come through?" Batman spoke into the transceiver. "What is the location?"

"Why?"

"Don't protect him."

"He won't betray us," Arrow said.

Batman rounded on him. "You don't know that. I do. I have seen it."

"No," the man approached him slowly, carefully, "you don't get it."

"I need to stop him before he suspects anything," Batman countered. His voice was desperate. Angry. Frightened. "While we still have a chance." He began dialling the keys on his gauntlet. "If he thinks we're on his side he won't attack straight away. We can take him down. Get him out of the game. We'll still have a chance..."

"I seem to remember you didn't attack us on first sight," Aquaman growled. "What's the difference between us and Superman." Gaze sharp. "Why is he so special?"

"He's Superman," Batman snarled. "I have been fighting one of those for years. I can't go up against two. We can't."

"Guys, look, it doesn't matter anymore," Cyborg interrupted them over the comlink. "Just shut up."

"We need to stop him while..."

"No, seriously," Cyborg said. "Shut up."

"While he trusts you?" Aquaman growled. "I've already lost one friend to this world, Batman. I'm not going to let you take another." The King of the Seas advanced. Armour glittered. Weapon lowered.

"I won't kill him," Batman snarled. "I'm not like him."

"You don't care," Aquaman spoke slowly. His voice shallow. "He murdered our friend and you don't care. You just want to make sure you stay in charge. Make sure we play this game by your rules." Spat. "You're just another wannabe dictator."

"I've been fighting this for years," Batman hissed. "You don't understand. None of your understand what I had to give up. What I've lost. The people I've lost just for trusting that mon..."

"Bruce?"

Batman's fingers froze. His breath hitched. His words caught in his throat.

"Bruce?" Superman's voice spoke over the comlink. Soft. Confused. Clark. "What's wrong?"

A stagnant silence.

It was the other world's Clark. Batman knew that. He knew it. But he couldn't... he sounded... like he used to...

Cyborg. "I told you guys to shut up."

"Who?" Clark's voice levelled. "Who was it?"

No one answered.

"I heard what you said, Aquaman," Clark pressed "Who is it? Who has been killed? What

happened?"

Aquaman looked stricken. "I... I..."

Face in profile. Eyes blazed. Blood on bat symbol.

Batman slumped down into the chair poised before the computer and stared at the unfinished code he'd been dialling into his suit. That voice... he hadn't heard that voice used like that since... God... but suddenly it was so hard to remember the feverous purpose that had driven him a moment before. Suddenly it was so hard to imagine that voice the voice of the enemy. It was Clark. Clark before... everything...

"Cyborg," he spoke softly. "Bring him here. We need to talk."

Hours later Clark sat slumped in the corner and stared at the screen as the all too familiar images slid painfully slow across it. His hair hung in tangled curls around his brow, his cape bunched unceremoniously beside him, and his eyes stared forward; stricken. The others had left in the wake of that look. Batman... couldn't. He could only stand hopelessly, uselessly, beside the man who looked so like the monster he'd fought and wish it were different. Wish everything were different.

"He was my best friend."

Batman nodded. "I know."

"I... killed him."

"No," he stopped the footage. "You didn't."

Tears slid unashamedly down the man's cheeks. "I should have tried harder. Come sooner. I could of... why did I kill him? Why would I do that?"

Batman looked at him. Looked at the familiar face, the hopeless misunderstanding plastered across his features, and the open, honest, despair shining from his eyes. Clark. His friend... no. His friend was gone. His friend left him years ago. This was another man's friend. A dead man's friend.

"You look just like him."

Batman looked away. "So do you."

"You wish I was him... he was me..."

The confession was painful, fallow, and course. An ugly, agonized, word dragged up through his throat. "Yes."

Clark sighed. "Me too. I'm sorry but... god... I wish you were... I wish..."

He wished he were Bruce. His Bruce. His friend. Batman stared resolutely at a stalagmite in the far corner of the cave. It glittered. Tiny droplets of water reflected the light from the equipment and monitors.

"... I wish... if I'd come sooner... hadn't stopped for lunch... I killed him... Bruce..."

Batman's mind spun with all the poisonous thoughts he'd battered aside for years, with the new painful accusations of the past few hours, and with the ugly reflection he suddenly saw in Harley. Harley. Joker had betrayed her countless times, hurt her, left her... but she still returned. It didn't make sense. But neither did he, standing as close as he dared to the man that had hurt him, betrayed him... the man he'd failed... even if it wasn't.

"If I'd figured out Joker's plan," Batman said softly, "if I'd called to Superman seconds earlier he would never have killed Lois. We would have saved Metropolis. He would still be like you."

Clark was looking at him. He could see the reflection in the frozen screen on the computer. He sighed and turned back towards the man. Looked across the short space between them to meet his wretched stare with one of his own.

And he couldn't pretend. Couldn't ignore the fact that this was Clark. Clark as he was before...

"Promise me," Batman said, "you won't kill him."

"Br-Batman... It's not..." he bowed his head. "It's not the time..."

"Promise me."

"No!" Suddenly he was in the air. Fists clenched. Eyes tinted red.

Batman stepped back. Glared. Glared at this sudden transformation.

Clark's anger broke as quickly as it had built.

"I... I can't do that... not right now... not after..." a broken sob. "God, but you look just like him." He covered his face and curled slightly, still hovering in the air. "I'm sorry... I just... need..."

Time. But, Batman knew, time didn't heal all wounds. Some festered. Some worsened. Some rotted until they pumped poison into veins. Poison so thick it left a black taste. A black bitter hate. A dark, pointless, hunger for revenge. A hunger that could be fed, but never satisfied. He thought of his parents. Of Dick. Of Superman... none of it healed. None of it.

He wouldn't lie. He wouldn't say it was going to be okay. Because it won't be. It would never be okay. Ever again.

He stepped forward, reached up and put a hand on Clark's forearm, pulled him gently down onto his feet.

"Please."

Clark kept his face down. Away.

"Please," Batman tried again. "I'm not him but I'm like him. I know he wouldn't have wanted you to kill."

A flickering smile. "No. He would kryptonite my arse if I did." He looked up. "And I bet you'd carry out his will on that."

"Damn right."

A shared smile.

"Okay," Clark finally said. Voice unstable. Breath broken. "Okay."

Batman nodded, looked away, looked back. Looked at the wild unkept hair, the simple chisled lines of the man's face, and the unmasked blue eyes staring aimlessly, hopelessly, forward. Clark. "I know this isn't entirely accurate," he muttered. "But it's good to have you back."

"It's... good to have you here..." Clark answered. His eyes fixed on him. "I don't want to forget his face. Forget him. I know you're not... but you look just... just the same... I just wish you were..."

Batman met those blue eyes, felt his own reflective wish tighten unspoken in his throat, and tried - as Clark tried - to memorize those features, that face, as it was. Not Superman. Not clean, not practised, not coldly oppressive... Clark.

They kissed.

Batman didn't know who had leant forward to close the gap between their lips. He couldn't guess if it had been him, Clark, or both of them. He couldn't have known even if his thoughts had been straight, unmuddled, cool. He couldn't of... even if it mattered.

His eyes flickered closed, he rolled his head to the side, and stroked those indestructable lips with his own. Felt Clark move to allow him to deepen the kiss. To allow Batman to explore the inside of his lip, the ridge of teeth, and the tip of his tongue. Gentle, careful, as if terrified he might break him, Clark moved his lips against Batman. Kissed him. Touched him. Held him. Close. Slow. Loving.

Wrong. It was wrong and they both knew it. Knew neither of them really wanted each other. Neither of them really wanted something they could get from each other. Neither of them wanted what they spoke of in their kiss. What they begged for in that touch. Neither of them could quite swallow the

taste of wrongness as they worked their lips together in slow, simple, patterns. Dancers in an empty, ruined, ballroom.

Bodies pulled close.

But... for a moment... they could pretend... pretend they were somewhere else... were someone else... holding someone else... holding Clark... his Clark... Bruce... his Bruce... caught between careful lips... and in that moment... it was beautiful.

Chapter 4

Wonder Woman tightened her star spangled armour around her hips and swung her sword and shield over her shoulders. The ice walls of the fortress reflected her in jarring detail; showed the swells and sags of her old uniform where her body had softened, the tangled mess of dark hair fallen free of its braid, and the gaunt pinch of her pale features. Hard. Bitter.

She was leaving.

Leaving the fortress.

Leaving Superman.

She doubted he would even notice.

Lasso looped onto hip and tied with a sturdy knot. Boots bulled up and buckled behind the knee. Her twin bracelets slipped on as impossibly as they always had. She wished she had something to wrap around her shoulders. But there was nothing save what Superman had given her. She didn't want to take anything other than what she'd come with. She didn't know why.

"Diana."

She looked up.

"Hardly anyone calls me that anymore, Flash," she muttered.

"Y-yes. I know." He slipped into the room in a blur of red. "Are you going home?"

Home. She didn't know if her island was 'home' anymore.

"I suppose so," she said with a forced smile. "It would be nice to see all my sisters again. I haven't had time to visit in months."

"Are you coming back?"

The question took her off balance. "I..."

"Oh," he looked aside. "I see."

She felt her throat constrict, her eyes burn, and her shoulder shake. "Do you?" A strained question. "Do you really?"

He looked up, met her eyes, and glanced quickly aside. "Y-yeah." A deep breath. "I saw him, well, kissing the other world's Batman. That was just before... before... Billy..." he stopped.

"I know," Wonder Woman said with forced authority. "Sometimes sacrifices have to be made."

"Yeah. It's just... the whole situation is really... fucked." He wound his fingers under his hood and threw it back with a sigh. "Shazam didn't do anything, you know, and neither did that guy we killed for the execution. They were good guys."

She waited.

The words fell out of him too fast. "And when he, um, kissed the other Batman, well, Batman didn't kiss back. Like, really, didn't kiss back, you know?" A tangle of interlaced words. "And that got me to thinking as how he got that mark on his cheek and all those bruises and how he broke those ribs and that hand and I couldn't help but think maybe that wasn't the first time Superman had," Flash paused, "kissed him."

She stayed silent.

"And now you're leaving," Flash continued faster. Words muddled. Slurred. "And Batman, the other Batman, is still here but the world thinks he's dead so I don't understand why he's here except maybe I do but I don't want to think about that. And everyone keeps giving each other these looks, especially the Yellow Lanterns and Adam, which look just like the looks hyenas get on those nature programs when they're planning on stealing food from a lion. And they're speaking a strange language which isn't Kryptonian, not that I speak Kryptonian, but I can tell it when I hear it, you

know. Now, I'm not saying nothing about anything bad because I don't know if it's anything bad and I'm scared of saying it now in case Supes is paying attention and he might hurt one of them but really they're good and it'll be my fault and I won't be able to explain because I'll be frozen like I was with Billy which is strange because, well, I'm the Flash and I couldn't move. I could hardly breathe! And I can't help but wonder if that's normal, but I don't know, because no one else seemed too upset and I didn't really know the kid but he was nice and we hung out and I don't think it was fair but I can't say that."

"Flash."

He stopped. Stared at her. Eyes hopeless.

"It's okay."

"Is it?"

"Yes," she lied. "Everything is fine."

"I'm not a child," he said with a faltering grin. "I've even got two degrees to prove it." Shook his head. "I'm sorry. I don't even know why all this has fucked me up so bad." He ran gloved fingers through his hair. "It's just all happened all at once, you know. The rebels. The doubles. Sinestro says Gotham is more rebellious than not. And he doesn't seem to care. He didn't even try to stop the doubles attacking the prison. Didn't even try to capture the real Batman."

"He's got a lot on his mind." Voice colder than intended. Sharp.

"You mean he's busy playing with his new toy Batman," Flash muttered. So fast. So quiet. She couldn't be sure he said it at all.

She sent him a sharp look. "Don't."

It was warning enough.

He could hear so much... so far... and words against him were never met kindly. She just hoped he

wasn't paying attention to Flash's little breakdown. Or her own neutral replies.

"I'm sorry," he said again. "I know I shouldn't say any of this. I don't even really mean any of it, you know."

She nodded gravely. "I know."

"Yeah. I just wanted to say I'll miss you. Like, I know you'll be here probably still more often than me but I'll miss you, you know, *here*. I always felt a little bit safer with you here."

The words hung in the large crystalline room.

She took a deep breath. "Thanks Flash."

"Yeah," his lips bent into an ugly mimic of a smile, "you're welcome, I guess."

They looked at each other for a moment in shared silence. Then he left. A blur of red. She sighed. Rubbed her brows. He'd always been the unstable one. Too pinned to traditional moral values, too hooked on the rights and liberties of the individual, and too short sighted to see the bigger picture. The greater plan at work.

Fuck, but she was having a hard time seeing the greater plan right then... All she could see was the crumbling foundations of the perfect world she and Superman had envisioned together. A dream he was letting die on the brink of its realisation. A dream he was failing so he could get off to an old fantasy. So he could fuck Batman.

Except it wasn't Batman. It was his double.

Did it even matter?

She picked up her tiara and slipped it over her head and onto her brow. Gave her reflection one last look. Tried to find the beauty others saw. Tried to find the woman she once had been. Gave up. Left.

The halls of the fortress were empty. Walls glittered with distant memories of a dead planet.

She wouldn't linger. Kicked off the ground and swooped through the desolate halls. Through the place that had been her home for years. Through Superman's Fortress of Solitude. And stopped.

She should have kept flying. Left.

Instead she paused, turned, and looked at the sheet of crystalline ice that stood between her and Superman. Stood between her and the fragile vengeance she could exact on the man that had done this to her. Left her. Crushed her dignity under the heel of his boot.

Her lips curled, fists clenched, and her breath snagged in the back of her throat. She approached that door. Watched it register her then fall slowly aside.

The room beyond was large, round, and flanked with a collection of banners all emblazoned with his golden crest. In the middle of the room was the war table. Behind it Superman sat staring ponderously at the wall. A small smile played at the corner of his lip.

"Superman."

"Wonder Woman," he said and looked up. Frowned. "Your old costume."

"Yes," she replied. "I'm leaving."

He blinked, frowned, looked back at the wall. "I'm sorry to hear that."

"Are you?"

Silence.

He hadn't been listening. Hadn't heard Flash. Part of her felt grateful for that small mercy. Another part withered at the thought. He hadn't been watching her. He hadn't been paying attention. She could have left and he wouldn't have realised. Wouldn't have noticed.

Her eyes dropped to the desk in front of him. Skimmed over the neglected documents. She thought of what Flash had said. Despite Superman's obvious withdrawal from her the League still reported to her as his second. She wondered how long that would last.

"Our patrols through Gotham city have been attacked by mobs of citizens, vigilantes, and former super villains," she recounted the information. "Since the apparent return of the Joker and his reported recent activity there has been a boom of discord in that city."

"Yes," Superman muttered. "It's more proof that Batman has teamed up with Joker against us. There is no way a sane man would let Joker free."

Her lip's pinched tighter. "That may be, Superman, but the question is what are you going to do about it?"

"Increase patrol numbers... or I could use the Atlantians. Now that Aquaman has finally signed that treaty the seas belong to me." He looked at her. "Or I could use the Amazons. I trust that is where you are going now. You could lead them into Gotham and take care of this," he considered, "civil unrest."

She felt her rage rise like vomit up her gullet. Bitter. Foul. Threatening to spill out from her in an ugly mess of anger, bitterness, and hurt. She swallowed.

"We are not police," she said stiffly. "We fight when the cause is noble. We do not turn over trashcans looking for a clown."

"The Atlantians then," he said with a wave. "I'm sure they'll find him."

"This is more than just the Joker," she snapped. "These disturbances have only escalated since his arrival. He is not the cause." A meaningful pause. "You know who the cause is."

He nodded absently. "Batman."

"Yes," she said bitterly. "Batman."

He smiled. Eyes still fixed unfocused on the wall.

Her eyes narrowed. "You're watching him now, aren't you," she muttered, "the other Batman."

He nodded. Unashamed. "He's escaped his bonds and is trying to hack the fortress to open the door." A slow smile. "And he's learning Kryptonian at an amazing rate."

Her eyes widened. "He broke... how?"

"He stole a fork when the androids last fed him," Superman said. "Since the shackles weren't repaired fully he was able to pull them apart and short the power." He shook his head. "All with his left hand."

"And you're not going to stop him?"

Superman shook his head. "He won't get any further. But... it is amazing watching him work. I've missed it." His brows lowered. "Now that he's officially dead it's not right I keep him in the cell... I should have the androids prepare a room."

Her fist clenched. "Give him mine." Voice bitter. "I don't need it anymore."

To her horror he seemed to consider this. Then his eyes darkened and he shook his head. "It is too nice," he muttered. "Too nice for a man who refuses to even admit..." he stopped and looked at her. Really looked at her. "What do you want?"

"Nothing," she lied. "I just came to say goodbye."

He accepted that. Turned away. Looked through the wall.

Her anger spilled like boiling water over the rim of a pot. Spilt uncontrolled down her features, across her body, and from between her lips.

"And," she sneered, "I came to remind you to do what you promised years ago." She dropped to the ground, seized some of the papers on his desk, and pushed them violently towards him. "Gotham belongs to the Batman for the first time since your take over, news reporters stammer when they talk of the security of your rule, and even your League is falling to pieces! Flash is on the verge of collapse, Shazam is dead, and half the others are circling you like vultures. You don't care!" Quietly. "You're losing it, Superman."

His eyes were red. "What do you want me to do?" He jeered. "I've made our perfect world. I've killed all those monsters, helped all those people, and for what? I've given this miserable planet everything! What else do you want me to do?"

"Save us, Superman," she snapped. "That's what you promised to do. That's what you're meant to do!"

"I have!" He stood. "I've saved this world more times than I can count and still you ask for more. Even you."

"I loved you," she hissed.

"Lois never asked me for anything," Superman snarled. "And Bruce..."

"Bruce?" She heard herself laugh. An ugly, shrill, sound. "How the fuck can you still think you have any kind of chance with that freak?! How can you be so fucking blind?! He hates you!"

"He will love..."

"No! He won't! A bloody child could see! He'll never love you!"

Red. She jerked her wrist in front of her face just as the beams of heat vision reached her. They bounced off her bracelet and struck a shard of ice with a thunderous crack. She stared at Superman. At the threatening glow of his eyes, the savage set of his bared teeth, and at the way he was suddenly flying above her. Glaring down at her.

He'd tried to kill her.

He'd tried to slice through her neck with a single sweep of his eyes. He'd tried to end her.

"Go," he snarled.

Hot tears spilt over her lashes. "F-fuck you," she stammered.

"Now."

She turned with a cry and bolted from the room. She flew out of the fortress, across the ocean, and towards her island. The home of the Amazons. Crashed into the sunbaked sand of the beach, curled up, and cried.

She cried until her throat was stripped bare, her eyes swollen, and her head a pit of pain. Then she lay and stared up at the sun as it slowly slunk across the sky. Stared at the desolate daylight sky pocked with stray wisps of clouds. Stared until the first stars started staring back.

"I loved you," she heard herself say. "I loved you so much. And our world. Our perfect world. I would have given anything for it." A parched smile. "For us."

She waited. She waited for him to drop out of the sky. To scoop her up in his arms. To apologize, tell her he loved her, and carry her back to the fortress. Back home.

She waited until the sky turned pink and the gulls flew from the rocky cliffs to fish in the churning waters.

He wasn't coming. Maybe he hadn't even heard her. Wasn't listening. Like Flash. He hadn't been listening to Flash even as the man spilt one treasonous word after another in his own stronghold. Why would she be any different? Why should she expect him to pay any more attention to her than to the speedster? After all, she was just another member of his team now. She wasn't anything special. Probably never was.

She stood, glared at the ditch of golden sand she'd spent the night in, and flew into the air. Flew around the shoreline until she found the glittering white city of her childhood stretching up the cliff face. A few of the women below stopped and pointed as she sailed overhead. One little girl screamed and hid behind her mother. None waved. None hailed her triumphant return.

She landed on the edge of the palace and pushed by the startled guards. Found her old quarters intact and untouched. A serving girl appeared and wordlessly offered her a bowl of scented water and a small towel. Behind her a second girl followed with a tray of fresh bread, grapes, and fish. In her other hand she held a goblet of pink wine.

"F-for you," she stammered.

Wonder Woman gratefully seized the towel and quickly washed her face and hands before taking the wine and tipping it down her parched throat. The flavour was strange. New. She frowned.

"Where is my mother?"

The girl looked blank.

"Where is the Queen?"

"The Queen?"

"Yes," she spoke carefully. "The Queen. Where is she?"

"You are the Queen," the other girl said when her companion failed to respond. "The old Queen died seven months ago."

Wonder Woman stared at the girls. "No... I would have been informed..."

"We sent word of her illness," the second girl said with a nervous smile. "But you refused to meet our messengers. I... I think you said you were too bussy?" The girl tried the foreign word.

"Busy," Wonder Woman corrected her. "I was too busy... I remember..."

The other girl's head bobbed in agreement. "The sisters were v-very angry when they heard you did

that. Vivina said you didn't mean to ever come back because you were busy hoeing." Her brow pleaded. "Those men should learn to bring in their own harvest like we do."

Both girls nodded gravely.

Wonder Woman felt like she was going to be sick. Hoeing. Whoring. This... this is what the Amazon people thought of her... this was her welcome home... and her mother... her mother had died... died waiting for her daughter to get a message only to find it turned away unread... gods... how could she forgive herself... how...

"You don't look as good as you did yesterday," one of the girls said. "Are you sick?"

She stiffened. "Yesterday?"

"When you first came home," the girl said. "You were so angry when you realised how long you had been gone."

"I..." her double. Her double was here. Of course her double was here. How could she not have guessed? How could she be so stupid? "Where did I go?"

The girls looked confused.

Wonder Woman's hands curled into fists "Did I leave? Did I spend the night? Where?!"

"I d-don't know! I'm sorry!"

Wonder Woman threw her goblet to the ground and raised her hand to strike the girl.

"I'm here Diana!"

She spun around. Her double hovered outside the window. Sunlight shone off polished gold armour, wild rich hair flew free around straight smooth features, and smooth muscles ran elegantly across her body. Her eyes a bright blistering blue.

Beautiful. She was beautiful. Perfect.

"Leave the girls alone." Commanding. Confident.

How... how could her double be so superior to her? How could she be so perfect while she was so... so... if she had been like that Superman would never have left her. If she had been so perfect she wouldn't have needed Superman to make her perfect world.

"What are you doing here?" Wonder Woman whispered.

"I was looking for you, Diana."

"No one... no one calls me that anymore..."

Eyes narrowed. "Why? It is your name as given to you by your Amazon mother. Or had you forgotten, Diana."

"Don't..."

"Your mother who you let die alone," the woman continued. "She wasn't asking for the attention of Wonder Woman. She was asking for her princess. Her daughter. She was asking for you, *Diana*."

Wonder Woman flew off her feet with a scream. Dove through the open window. Tackled her double out of the air.

"Don't call me that!" She punched her. "No body calls me that!" Knocked that perfect face first to one side. "You don't get to call me that!" Then the other. "Ever!" A hand grabbed her fist and a knee slammed into her gut.

"I won't call you Wonder Woman," her double spat. They grappled as they tumbled through the air. Half flying. Half falling. "Wonder Woman is the protector of the Amazon people. Their Champion!" Together they struck the side of the cliffs and rolled down towards the dockside. "You're not that."

Wrestled as they broke through the brush and rock shelf. "I won't call you Wonder Woman!"
Smashed into the pavement below.

Wonder Woman tried to stand. Instantly her double was on her, pinning her, landing blow after blow. She felt the marble turn to powder under her, she tasted blood and bile rise up her throat, and she felt her lasso torn from her hip. Wrapped around her shoulders. Her wrists.

"Not fair," she heard herself say. "I loved him. Us. I would have done anything for our perfect world. It's not fair. I should be like you. Look like you. He should love me. Not him. Why does he have to love him? It could have been perfect... we would have been perfect."

"Your *perfect* world killed one of my best friends," her double snarled. "How is that for fair?"

Chapter 5

Superman knew he was hurting him. He could see it in the flicker of a flinch that snaked across the man's savage snarl. He could hear it in the ragged, broken, gasps of air that scraped in and out of his lungs. Feel it in the bunch of his muscles under his touch.

But in that moment. He didn't care.

Bruce struggled to rise. Superman grabbed the back of his neck and pushed him roughly back down into the stiff mattress. Held him. Felt the cells under his hands burst and bleed. Felt them bruise around the shape of his fingers.

Didn't matter.

It didn't matter because even as Bruce writhed, twisted, and struggled uselessly against him Superman felt a hot, angry, prickling of savage pleasure rise to engulf him. Felt his own muscles shiver. Felt his mouth go dry.

It didn't matter because, despite himself, there was something disgustingly, inexcusably, beautiful about seeing Bruce like this. Of seeing the domineering Batman hot, hurt, and held down. The perfect line of scar lined muscle bunched against him; flushed and coated with sex smelling sweat. The clench of fist as he struggled hopelessly to throw him; tightened with every roll of Superman's hips. The bared teeth flashing between taunt lips even as he tried to swallow the tiny sounds that betrayed his own dark desperate want.

He grabbed Bruce's hip with his other hand and held him still as he drove into him with new found urgency. Faster. Harder.

Heard Bruce's breath break into an agonized cry.

Bruce's hands flew down to claw at Superman's fingers wrapped around his hip. To pull uselessly at the hold Superman held him in.

"Superman..." there was a breathlessness in his voice that had nothing to do with pleasure. "Fuc--- Superman!"

Superman realised how hard he was holding Bruce's hip. Squeezing it. On the verge of breaking it. With a savage growl he forced his grip to loosen, pulled his hand away, and slammed his fist into the wall with a thunderous crack.

And then he was coming. A blitz of white hot pleasure bloomed from his cock. Raced up his torso. Ran to the tips of his fingers. His toes. Left a trail of heat like fire in his veins. And all the time he watched Bruce. Hungrily devoured the sight of him. Forced, flushed, and fighting. He spilt his load into him. Filled him. Fucked him. Fucked him so hard he knew it hurt him.

But in that moment. He didn't care.

He moaned the last of his pleasure and let his hand around Bruce's neck loosen. Slip.

Instantly the man moved to rise. Superman planted his palm on Bruce's back and resolutely pushed him back, face down, into the mattress.

"You're..." Superman said between steady breaths of air, "such a stubborn arse.... It'll hurt less if you... stop fighting."

Bruce glared up at him. Pale blue eyes alight with unmasked fury. Fury stained by what could have been a flicker of... fear? Could it be? Superman let his eyes glow red for a moment. The reaction was small. Hidden behind an angry snarl. But it was there. Bruce flinched, sucked in a shallow breath of air, and tightened his fist. Superman slid his tongue along his teeth thoughtfully.

His breathing slowly returned to normal.

Bruce's didn't.

He was still struggling to stifle his heavy breathing. To hide the flush of his cheeks. The hitch that scraped against every intake of air. Superman's lips curled.

"Sorry, Bruce. I almost forgot."

He levitated for a moment, flipped Bruce onto his back, and repositioned himself over the man.

"Your turn."

He descended onto the man's swollen member and stroked the underside of the shaft with his tongue. Flicked the head as he rose. Repeated the motion with more force. Grinned as Bruce bucked forward.

He slid, licked, and sucked until pearly drops of precome splashed across the back of his tongue. Bruce shook, writhed, and clawed at the mattress under him. Mouth a stiff line. Jaws locked closed.

With a growl Superman wrapped a hand around the base of Bruce's shaft and pumped him as he rose to deftly slip the fingers on his other hand into Bruce's mouth, around to the back of his teeth, and under the gap behind his molars.

"Let me hear you, Bruce."

Gently but firmly he wedged open the man's jaw. Instantly, like the breaking of a dam, a strangled moan escaped the man's throat.

Superman ground his hips into Bruce, crushed his erection between their bodies, and stroked Bruce's member in time with the tell tale movement of air shifting in and out of the man.

Bruce was gasping, groaning, and grating his teeth against Superman's fingers. Tossing his head. Trying to throw the hand from his mouth. But coming. Coming for him.

Superman kissed the side his neck. His throat. His jaw. Slid his tongue along the crude S shaped brand on his cheek.

And... god... but this man was addictive. The mere taste of him sent bolts of pleasure through Superman, the strangled sounds slipping through Bruce's open mouth left him dizzy with desire, and the buck of the body underneath him... god... it was Batman. Batman. The same man who had knocked the Justice League into shape with a single, dark, look. The same man who could make super humans quell in his presence. Batman. Held under him. Coming for him. Batman.

His. He was his.

Bruce came. Arched against him. Voice strangled. Face flushed. He spilt his load between their pressed bodies.

Bruce was his but, Superman knew, *he* was also Bruce's. He belonged to Bruce. He belonged to Bruce as surely as Bruce did to him. All the man would have to do to claim him was turn his head, lean forward, and kiss him. All he had to do was respond and Superman was his. Superman pulled his fingers free and gently kissed the side of Bruce's mouth coaxing. Asking. Begging.

All he had to do was confess his evident want. Admit their shared need. Admit he loved him too. All he had to do was kiss him back. Such a brief simple thing and all the pain, all the uncertainty, and all Wonder Woman's lies would be gone. If he would just...

Bruce turned his head aside, pulled their lips apart, denied him.

Superman struck him. Struck him hard enough to snap his head to the side, for blood to spill between beautiful sensual lips, for Bruce to gasp - a low tempting sound - in pain.

"You're so stubborn," Superman muttered. Tried to mask the bitter disappointment in his voice. Tried to sound sure and not desperate. "You've got to see it. You've got to realise how... how *right* this is, Bruce. How right *we* are. Together." He shook his head. "So why do you pretend not to? Why do keep pretending this is all so... wrong. Why do you keep denying it? Denying us?"

"Why do you want me?" Bruce snarled. "I'm not your Batman."

Superman cupped his cheek in his palm. "You're the same, can't you see? Our worlds... there is no difference. Only timing." He forced a smile. "Timing poisoned this world's Batman. Turned him against me. But you... you never..." he shook his head. "No. That's not true. You're not the same as him. You're better. You're the Batman I always should have had, Bruce. Can't you see? It was always meant to be us. Together we were meant to rebuild this world. Fix this world. Save it."

He leant forward and pushed a single, small, kiss onto Bruce's lips. Tasted the blood, sweat, and sex staining his skin. Inhaled a brief breath of the rich, intoxicating, aroma which was Bruce.

"I need you," Superman heard himself whisper. "You're perfect and... god I haven't wanted

someone... needed someone... never have I lost control before like I do with you. Never. Just the sight of you..."

He kissed Bruce again. Ignored the way Bruce tried to twist away, ignored the tight lines of the man's lips, ignored the clamp of the man's jaw. Indulged in the shape of those lips, the slight prickle of his unshaven jaw, and the rough edges of the brand burnt into his cheek.

"You'll see it," he sighed against the man's skin. "I know you will. I know you. You'll see how perfectly we fit together. How much better the world is. We'll be Kings."

"You," Bruce growled, "know nothing of me."

But suddenly even the anger, even the hate, even the contempt that polluted Bruce's words didn't seem to matter. Nothing he could say could spoil this. Nothing he could do would take away the fact that he had come for him, that they had come for each other. Nothing could remove the fact that, despite everything he said, he felt for him. Loved him. Sooner or later he would have to admit that. He would have to stop pretending.

He slumped back onto the bed and pulled the man gracelessly into his lap. Resolutely ignored his snarled protests and thought only of the future. Their future.

Nursed those thoughts until sleep reached out and claimed him.

When he woke he was warm. Happy. Content. He lay under a soft white sheet and stared up at the tangle of ice that closed over his head. At the closed dome of the fortress hanging silently above his bed. Beyond it the night sky was alight with a collection of multicoloured stars. Most too distant for the human eye to see.

He'd been dreaming. Dreaming about something... something far away... the past. The time the doubles first started appearing. The time Wonder Woman had left him. The time he'd first found Bruce. His Bruce.

The first time he'd fallen asleep with the man on his arm.

At the thought he became aware of the man sleeping next to him. He looked down. Smiled. In sleep the hard lines of Bruce's face eased, the usually staunch features softened, and his age seemed to

frame his beauty rather than mar it. He was as he should be. Beside him. Partners.

Bruce turned his head towards him as he rolled unconscious towards the heat of Superman's body. The light caught the square line of his jaw, the point of his cheekbones, and the weathered white scar that sat low on his face.

Superman looked at that scar. He looked at the roughly hewn S branded into Bruce's flesh and felt the distant prickling of regret. It had been years. Decades. Decades since he'd branded Bruce in a fit of anger. Decades since he'd burnt his mark onto the man's flesh. Decades since the man had looked at him with a perfect, unmarred, face. Since then it had been a reminder of that first time they coupled. Both the good. And the bad.

He reached out. Reached out as if to wipe off the offending scar. Reached out towards Bruce.

The man's eyes opened. He looked up. Caught sight of Superman sitting up, arm outstretched.

"What is it, Master?"

Superman opened his mouth. Stopped. Stared in horror at Bruce. At the cold resignation on his face.

No. This wasn't right. Bruce was meant to love him. To accept his love for him. They were meant to be together. Partners. Kings. Not...

"Bruce I..."

The man waited.

"Bruce this isn't what... this isn't right. This isn't..." he shook his head. "Don't call me master."

"What shall I call you?"

Superman could hardly meet the man's eyes. Hardly bare to see that brutally placid acceptance in his normally sharp gaze. Worse. So much worse than his anger. His fear.

"Whatever you want too," he muttered. "Bruce I'm not... you're not my slave... this isn't right. This..." A slow realisation. "This isn't real."

Bruce's look revealed nothing. His eyes dark. Silver lined hair a mess around his brow. And Superman couldn't ignore that look. Couldn't ignore the aged hopelessness in those eyes. Instantly he was kneeling beside him, brushing back that hair, and cradling his face.

"You are so much more than that, Bruce. You always were. You know that."

Bruce didn't resist his touch like Superman expected. Neither did he welcome it. He allowed it. Like a toy he let Superman move him, touch him, but didn't respond to him. As emotionless as plastic.

"No, Bruce don't... don't do this..."

Dream... must be a...

"What do you want me to do, Superman?"

The way he used his name... a title. A detached tag. There was no intimacy. No love. No kindness.

"Love me."

Bruce moved. Folded the sheets to the side and began pulling off his clothes.

"Bruce no!" Superman choked in horror. "Don't! That isn't what I meant!"

Bruce stopped. Looked at him. Waited. Waited as numb as a computer waits for its next instruction. As emotionless as the pillars of ice that constructed the walls of the room.

"No," Superman felt his shoulders shake. His hurt peak at the desolate look in Bruce eyes. "This isn't what was meant to happen. This isn't... this isn't it. This isn't you, Bruce. This... this can't be us. I

love you."

Bruce's response was instant. Like a pre-recorded message. "I will never love you."

The same words he'd spoken the day after they'd first had sex. The same words he's spoken when Superman first professed his plan to drag Bruce out of his doomed spiral of hatred towards him in love. The same words Superman had shrugged off. The words he believed meant nothing... echoed forever on Bruce's lips.

Anger rose in him. Anger at the echo of those bitter, ugly, words. Anger at Bruce for saying them in the first place. Anger at the lie.

"Say that again," Superman whispered, "say that again and I'll kill you."

Without a moment of hesitation. "I will never love you."

Superman stared at the man. Stared at the hard unflinching set of his features. The brutal honesty in his eyes. He wanted to die. The realisation hit hard. Hurt. Like kryptonite.

His anger failed him.

"No," Superman rasped. "You were meant to realise. You were meant to love me. You were meant to be happy. We were meant to be happy." He shook his head. Denied it. Denied it all. "No... no no no... this isn't right! This isn't us. This is... a dream... it's a dream... a lie. Wonder Woman's lie. She's the one that put this in my head. She's the one that said we could never be happy together. You love me!"

Bruce didn't respond. Didn't react. Didn't flinch at the harshness of Superman's tone. Like a toy. A computer. A worn slave used to the uncertain mind of his master.

"No..." Superman grabbed the man and pulled him forward. Crushed their lips together. Bruce allowed himself to be kissed. Allowed his lips moved. Allowed his mouth invaded. He didn't fight like he used to. Didn't clamp his jaw closed or try to turn his head away... but somehow this empty acceptance was worse... so much worse... at least before he showed some emotion. Some response. Now he was hollow. Empty. Cold. Superman pulled back. "God damn you kiss me!"

Obediently Bruce leant forward and kissed him. A careless touch of lip on lip. Then he drew back. Awaiting his next command.

Superman stared, clenched his jaw, and savagely pulled down Bruce's pants. He needed some response from this man. Anything. Something that told him this was all an act. A lie.

He pulled Bruce's bare thighs over his shoulders and took the entire length of the man into his throat. Seized Bruce's hips in his hands and began to pull the man forward, to crush him against him, and roughly stroke his skin in time with the touch of his tongue.

Bruce grew hard with a speed that spoke of training. The man himself remained impassive. Distant. Too soon it was over. A mouthful of come, a collection of bruises to match Superman's fingers, and yet not a sound from the man. He watched him. Waiting, just as before, for his next order.

Superman rocked back under the weight of his failure. Under the bleak, horrid, realisation that he'd lost. He'd failed to save Bruce. He'd failed to make the man fall in love with him. He'd failed... instead of the love he'd dreamed of sharing he'd created a robotic sex slave.

"Do that to me," Superman muttered. Rolled onto his back and watched as Bruce took up position between his legs and fell onto his cock. Bruce worked with simple, raw, efficacy. Moved his mouth, tongue, and hands; equipped with the sharp precise knowledge of how to bring Superman to orgasm as quickly as possible.

To Superman's shame it worked. His face flushed hot, his hands balled into fists, and he moaned through his teeth as he released into Bruce's mouth. The man swallowed. Wiped the side of his mouth on his forearm. Sat back and waited for his next instruction.

Superman sat up. His breathing slowly melting back into a normal rhythm. Met Bruce's cold stare.

"Do you really want to die?"

"Yes."

Voice soft. Confused. "Why?"

"I hate what my life has become." Brutal simple honesty. Bruce.

"Why? I love you. I care for you. I would do anything for you. If you'd just stop this... if you'd just love me... life would be perfect." He shook his head. "It's been years Bruce. Surly after all these years you can understand... surely you can see..."

"This is the one thing you can't take from me, Superman," Bruce said. "You can break me. You can take me. But you can't have this." Eyes cold. "It's the only thing of mine left."

"If you'd give it up I'll give you the world."

"I know." Bruce's eyes closed for a moment. The lines on his face deepened. His head bowed forward. "I don't want your world." His voice never rose from its icy monotone. "I don't want this." Eyes opened. "I don't want you." A horrid pause. "I never did."

"That's not true. That's a lie. You wanted it!"

Bruce's face suddenly twisted in pain. "Superman!"

"You wanted it! You want it now! Who is it? Who has turned you against me? Was it Wonder Woman? The other Batman? Joker? Who?!"

"Superman... let go..."

Superman woke.

He was in his bed. His sheets were tangled around him. Bruce was on top of him.

"Superman," the man said through gritted teeth. Face peaked with sweat. Voice trembling. Eyes wide. "Let... ah... let go." The brand on his cheek was red. Fresh. Surrounded by a series of bruises, bite marks, and scratches that spanned across the bottom side of his face. His hair was dark.

Dream... it was just a dream... he'd known that... he'd...

"Let go of me."

Superman realised he was holding Bruce's wrist. Squeezing it. On the verge of breaking it. In his sleep he must have grabbed Bruce. Pulled him across the bed. Pulled him on top of him.

"Superman..."

He let go.

Bruce gasped and almost collapsed against him. Blood welled under skin.

"I'm sorry Bruce."

Eyes shot icy daggers as the man retreated. Returned to the far side of the bed. Watched him with the intensity an antelope watches a passing lion.

"I didn't mean..." rubbed temple. "It was just a dream. Just a bad dream."

Bruce looked ready to jump from the mattress despite his broken leg. Mistrust, hate, and fear warred for dominance behind his eyes. But, by god, he was beautiful. There was nothing empty. Nothing complacent. Nothing like his dream in this man.

Superman slumped back into the bed and sighed. It was the stress of everything. Of the war. Of Bruce's behaviour. Of Wonder Woman leaving... all of it was whittling slowly away at him. But he couldn't let it get to him. He couldn't let it come between Bruce and him. Not now. Not when Bruce was still confused. Still fighting. He had to stay strong. Unyielding. In control. He had to stay in control.

"It's okay," he muttered. "I won't hurt you. You can go back to sleep."

But he didn't.

Neither of them did.

As morning came Superman climbed out of the bed and quickly dressed in his discarded uniform. As he threw his cape around his shoulders he turned to look back at the man watching him from the bed.

"I'll be back tonight."

Bruce didn't respond. Eyes narrow. Calculating.

Superman turned sharply away from that look. Too similar to the look Bruce had worn in his dream. Too cold. Too dark. Too closed off from him. Bruce feared him. Not enough to make him mindlessly complacent. Just enough to make him careful. To make him dangerous.

With a low growl he flew away, swooped out of the fortress, and bolted up into the atmosphere.

Instantly he became aware of the angry protests of people rallying against the Atlanteans in Gotham. Of the mob gathered outside the Hall of Justice. Of the battle cries of his allies as they battered back the people and scooped ring leaders from the crowd.

Control. He needed to stay in control. But he was losing it. All across the globe people were watching Gotham. Were watching Metropolis. Were watching the cracks in his empire. It was Batman and Joker. They were planning this somehow. They were breaking down his influence. The trust people had in him. They were turning everyone against him just like Batman had turned Bruce against him.

With poisonous lies.

Lies like the ones Wonder Woman told.

Like the ones Bruce told.

Like the ones that had invaded his sleep. Twisted his dreams. Threatened to destroy him under a

weight of sudden doubt.

He rubbed at his temple, snarled, and flew away from the planet. Away from the noise. The distractions. The lies. Away from the endless cries for help, the shouts of the protesters, and the responding bellows of rage from his allies. He needed to think. To figure this out. To make sense of the swirling mess everything had become.

The League was falling apart, his world was crumbling, and on top of it all Bruce still wouldn't admit.... wouldn't kiss him... wouldn't even talk to him... if only he would... if only Superman could trust him. Bruce would be able to figure everything out. Fix everything. With a batman on his side they could finally achieve the level of peace Wonder Woman had only dreamed of. With a batman he could pull the League back in line and silence the protesters.

With Bruce at his side the world, their world, would finally be saved.

Chapter 6

Bruce stood under the scolding torrent of water and scrubbed his arms, his chest, his neck. He scrubbed until his skin was a vivid angry pink. Then a blistered painful red. He scrubbed until he bled. Then he covered himself with soap and scrubbed some more.

Look at you.

He could still smell him. Behind the soap, behind the water, he could still detect the distinctive, powerful, scent of Superman. Superman on his skin, his jaw, his every pore. It stained his tongue, his teeth, his lips.... He spat. Gulped a mouthful of soapy water. Spat again.

On your knees.

He could still see Superman above him. Holding him. Hurting him. He could still feel the ache in his teeth as he bit down uselessly against the invading tongue. He could still feel the lingering presence of those hard, unyielding, fingers pushing him, pinning him, as easily as if he weighed nothing. Was nothing.

It's what you want.

He grabbed a washcloth, gritted his teeth, and scrubbed at his face. At his right cheek. At the burnt flesh. At the brand.

Isn't it?

He scrubbed until his hands hurt.

Whore.

Until his face went numb.

To be forced.

“No!”

He flung the soapy rag away from him and clawed at his cheek. Scratched until he felt skin peel away under his nails. Until blood trickled down his fingers, his wrist, his elbow, to drop onto the shower’s tiled floor. Scratched until his arm sagged in exhaustion by his side.

He bowed his head under the stream of water, closed his eyes, and sucked in slow shallow breaths through an open mouth. Air... Water... Superman... he could still smell him.

Sharp. Certain. Alien.

He tried to stagger his breathing. Keep his intake of air shallow. His mouth open... but he couldn’t ignore it. Everywhere. Suddenly the smell was everywhere. On everything. So thick he could hardly breathe. So imposing he thought he would choke.

It was almost as if he were there... watching... closing in...

Bruce spun towards the door. Leant on his broken leg. Collapsed onto his hands and knees on the interlaced tile and crystal ground.

He was gasping now. Sucking in deep, frantic, gulps of air. Drowning. Drowning in that smell.

He pushed himself to his feet, leant against the wall, and faced the door. Certain that at any moment his red caped captor would float in with that look... that look that spoke on an unquestionable intent. Of a dark, deepening, maddened love.

Nothing.

The door remained closed.

He was alone.

Slowly he regained control of his breathing. Slowly he swallowed the mindless flood of emotions battling for supremacy inside his skull. Slowly he took control.

He couldn't do this. He couldn't survive this. Not like this.

It wasn't the knowledge that Superman had raped him. Twice. No. As horrid as that was he could swallow it. It was that he could, and would do it again. And there was nothing Bruce could do about. Nothing he could do to even make it a slightly less pleasant experience for him. Nothing but wait for it to happen and struggle uselessly when it did.

He hadn't felt like this since the years directly after his parents died. This utter rendering of himself. This total lack of control. This hopeless, violent, bleak struggle against the impossible unfairness and savagery of the universe. Only this time Alfred wasn't there to help him through it. This time there was no great vengeance he could find. This time... there was only this. Backed up against a wall, fists up, teeth bared and all his years of training as useless as a pebble hurled at a planet.

He couldn't do this. He couldn't... he needed to think. He needed to figure this out. He needed to find out how to stop this. How to escape this.

He'd already tried to hack into the fortress but despite making headway into understanding the language the alien crystalline structure worked with he couldn't overcome Superman's command to keep him imprisoned. Despite hours he hadn't been able to open the doors. What was worse, when the androids had come they had shown no alarm at finding him unbound. That meant Superman knew he'd been trying to escape. That meant Superman had been watching. That meant he'd never really had a hope of getting out. That meant he probably never would.

He tried to banish that thought. Tried to take stock of his situation. Found only a dim knowledge of pain echoing from what seemed like every part of his body and a sudden suffocating sense of defeat. He was alone. The whole world believed him dead. And a maddened Superman held the key to his cage.

Overlaying even that was the mind lulling exhaustion born of the last few sleepless days. The unspeakable wariness of days of constant fear, of anger, of pain. But he couldn't rest. Not yet. Not when Superman could show up at any moment. Not with the memories of the last few days flashed white hot behind his eyelids.

Slowly he slumped back against the wall of the shower, forcibly uncurled his fingers, and rubbed his face. Let the hot water wash across him. Superman had given him one piece of information. One thing he could work off. He would be back tonight. Bruce doubted he would break that promise.

That gave him roughly twelve hours. In that time he needed to assemble some plan. Wring some sense of control from the mangled mess his life had become.

Twelve hours.

The swirl of his mind cooled, stilled. Slowly he let his body slide till he was sitting on the floor of the shower eyes still fixed resolutely on the door. Slowly he let himself drift into a place not quite sleep but not quite awake. Slowly time passed. Slowly he managed to piece together some structure of a plan. He needed to test the waters. Find out who Superman really was. Find out if he could be manipulated.

It wouldn't be easy. Superman may be losing himself but he was still clever. He would expect this.

He could still smell him half an hour later when he finally staggered from the shower. He could still taste him as he limped, leaning against the wall, towards the sink and towels. He could still feel those fingers, those teeth, those thrusts, as he leant against the basin and stared into the mirror at his own wretched appearance.

His hair was plastered to his brow in an unruly tangle, his chin darkened behind a new layer of stubble, and his face, shoulders, and neck covered in a vivid variety of different wounds. And there among the crisscross scratches, the bite marks, and bruises, glared the crudely hewn S shape of Superman's brand. It was bleeding where the scabs had been torn off but still stood vindictively distinctive among the other marks on his flesh.

He pulled a towel from the rail, wiped it across his cheek once, and then resolutely turned away from his reflection. Limped from the bathroom and into the small Spartan bedroom beyond.

Two robots hovered nearby. One bore a tray of simple food and another brought a suit of the kind Bruce Wayne billionaire playboy would wear.

He dressed like a man putting on armour.

The day rolled into evening with surprising speed. Evening became night.

It was late when Superman appeared.

The alien floated through the door and descended to stand in the middle of the room. His hair was windswept, cheeks pale, and eyes alight. He looked strangely invigorated as he shrugged back his cape and held out a hand towards Bruce.

“Come here.”

Bruce stayed where he was.

“I won’t hurt you. I want to show you something.”

“I want my belt.”

Superman blinked. A small smile touched the corner of his lip. “Are you bargaining with me Bruce?” A thoughtful pause. “That’s the third stage of acceptance.”

“I want it.”

“You can’t have it.”

Bruce glared.

Inside he analysed the fleeting look of triumph that flickered across the alien’s features. Drew careful lines to unproven conclusions. Tried to ignore the hint of red that snaked across the man’s iris. Tried to pretend he didn’t shrink back from that sight.

Superman advanced. Bruce backed away.

“Why do you want it?”

A stony glare.

“You can’t be so stupid to think I would give you something I know contains kryptonite. You must know if I did grant you this wish I would see it removed. What else are you after?”

Bruce staggered back into the wall. Superman closed the gap.

“Is there a communication devise? Some information that might help you hack the fortress? A special batarang to save the day?”

Silence.

Superman frowned as he scrutinized Bruce. One hand reached out, seized Bruce’s chin, and turned his face to the other side revealing the brutalized brand on his cheek.

“You shouldn’t do that,” Superman’s voice was stiff. Controlled. “I’ll take longer to heal.”

“It’ll never heal,” Bruce growled. “You know that.”

Superman didn’t relent his hold on Bruce’s jaw. Slid his thumb through the coarse hair starting to sprout from his skin.

“How’s the cast on your leg?” Superman muttered. “Your hand? Do you need new bandages?” He touched the edge of the brand. “Would you like one for this?”

“Why?” Bruce asked.

Superman frowned. “You know the answer to that.”

“You’re just going to break me again,” Bruce said. “Why heal me?”

“Like I said,” the alien whispered. “You know the answer to that.”

He leant forward. Bruce turned his head to the side. Superman accepted that. Kissed the side of his face instead. Grunted in dissatisfaction as he slid his lips against the stubble lining Bruce's jaw.

"Ah..." he breathed against his skin, "I liked this before... but it's getting too heavy."

Bruce refused to turn away from the intensity of those vivid blue eyes. He couldn't waver. Not yet.

Superman sighed. "Still fighting. I would have thought you'd learnt by now."

Superman pushed Bruce into the wall, grabbed his jaw and pulled his head back, exposing his throat.

Bruce realised what he was doing. Felt a sickening lump of fear surge up his throat. "No! Don't!"

Superman ignored him. Eyes blazed red.

Bruce froze as the air was filled with the scent of burning hair. He closed his eyes. Held his breath. Tried not to focus on the heat sweeping systematically across his cheeks, chin, and throat. Tried to ignore the suddenly red hot memories of the pain as Superman branded him.

A powerful cold breath in his face and a thumb gently stroked his cheek.

"Much better."

Bruce struggled to swallow his fear and return the same angry look he had worn earlier. "Don't do that again."

"You broke out of your old shackles with a fork," Superman said with a grin. "And yet you think I'd give you a razor? No, Bruce, I know you too well. You'd come up with some impossible application for it and cause no end of damage." His smile slipped slightly. "I can't trust you. Not... not yet."

Superman looped an arm under Bruce and pulled him into the air. Bruce stiffened in shock as they

were suddenly flying through the fortress. Around the twisting crystalline halls, through the banner draped archways, and out into the frozen air of the open night. Except it wasn't night. A pale sky drifted lazily towards purple and a hash of red lined the horizon. A scattering of stars shone eerily bright overhead. Dusk. The closest the Arctic Circle got to night this time of year.

"It was like this when I first came up here," Superman whispered close to his ear. "See how the red shines off the ice? See how it seems to go on forever? Like we're not on a planet at all but a sun. A red one. Like Krypton must have had." He chuckled. "I think that's why I built here. It's so far away from everything else... so beautiful... that if you think hard enough... such fantasies begin to seem real."

They swooped back towards the fortress and landed on a nook between two pillars of crystal. Superman sat on the top of one pillar to lean against the body of the other and locked one forearm around Bruce's hips to pull him firmly into his lap.

"I thought you'd like to see it."

The wind was cold. Colder than even the sweeping arctic plain before them suggested. Cold enough to invoke a violent shiver from the man. Superman noted the movement, muttered something in Kryptonian, and quickly wrapped his cape around them blocking out the worst of the wind's chill.

Then he pressed his lips to the side of Bruce's jaw. Trilled kisses down his neck. Nosed aside the collar of his shirt.

"I want my belt."

Superman looked up at him. Gaze dark. "You can't have it." Bit him where shoulder joined neck.

Bruce gritted his teeth. "Why?"

"I can't trust you." Worked his mouth up the side of his neck. Holding him easily in place with his spare hand.

"I need something, Superman. Something mine."

“I’m yours,” Superman said with a small laugh. “That’s enough.”

“No,” Bruce growled. “It isn’t.”

Superman’s hand slid up and tangled painfully tight in his hair. “Only because you won’t let it be, Bruce.”

He kissed him. Bruce closed his eyes and locked his teeth together. It wasn’t enough.

Superman’s tongue quickly forced up his jaw and swept into his mouth. Crudely claimed him, tasted him, owned him...

Whore.

Bruce bucked and twisted against the invasion. Against the taste, the smell, the presence that assaulted his senses. Against Superman.

Fighting me, Bruce?

The alien’s fist tightened in his hair, the forearm against his hips crushed him back into position, and one leg bumped deliberately against Bruce’s broken one sending a bolt of jarring pain racing up his thigh.

Go ahead.

“It’s your choice,” Superman hissed as he drew back. “It’s your choice how this happens. You can fight me and get hurt or you can give up this game. If you respond with hate I’ll respond in kind. If you respond in love...” Softer. “That’s fair. I decide when. You decide how.”

I always imagined it rough with you.

“You’re in control. That’s what you want isn’t it? You always did like to be in control.”

It'll just make things all the better.

Bruce sucked in shallow breaths of air and violently yanked his head to the side. Feeling a flash of pain as hair was pulled out in Superman's fist.

"Don't touch me!"

Unyielding fingers attached themselves to his jaw. Yanked his head around.

"And you were being so good."

This kiss was harder. Crueller.

Superman's scent, his taste, his presence flooded over Bruce like a wave. Crashed into his unwilling senses and dragged him down under the weight of his helplessness. Of the hopelessness. Of defencelessness...

It was easier... so much easier just to pretend... to pull away from his body... to pull away from the pain... humiliation... defeat... to instead imagine Alfred clicking his tongue over the dust on the cave handrails, to analyse the mutation of clay face or the chemical build up of the latest fear toxin, to run across the roof tops of Gotham towards the glaring eye of the bat sign--

Superman abruptly retreated and struck him across the face.

"Don't do that! Don't ever do that!"

Bruce's eyes snaked back towards him. Saw an unmasked, unexplainable, fear blazing behind red tinted eyes.

"I did what you wanted," Bruce muttered in confusion.

“No! You didn’t! You didn’t respond! You just... just.... Stopped!”

Bruce frowned at that look. Tried to read it. To understand it. “I stopped fighting. Isn’t that what you wanted?”

Superman hit him again. Closed fist.

The world flashed white. Bruce fell out of his grasp to sprawl on the ice. Could taste blood.

“I’m not your master, Bruce,” Superman snapped. “You’re not my slave! That’s not us. I won’t let that happen. I won’t! Get up!”

Bruce couldn’t. He could hardly see.

Superman grabbed hold of his collar and pulled him aloft. Warm blood spilt down his chin. Began to freeze on his lip.

“You’re meant to kiss me because *you* want to, Bruce.” Closer. “You do. I can see you do. You want it more than I do. Why else would you fight so hard? Why else would you do this?”

“I...” Bruce blinked his eyes back into focus. “I don’t...”

“You do!”

Superman dropped him. Bruce cried out as he landed on his broken leg. Fell onto his side. Agony flared across his ribs. His hand. His cheek.

Superman stood over him, rubbing his temple, and shaking his head. “God... why do you make me do this, Bruce? Why do you have to make everything so hard? I love you. You know that. It’s why you think you can get away with acting like this. But... when you say things like that. When you act like this. What do you expect to happen?”

Bruce stared up at him. Stared up, uncomprehending, into the furious glare of the man standing over

him. Superman's cape billowed around him, his eyes flashed a hallowed red, and his hands were balled into fists at his side. He looked like a god of war. Angry, justified, unstoppable...

"Superman."

He looked up.

Both the Yellow Lanterns drifted down from above, their rings flashing an ugly gold in the twilight light. They came to hover beside the pair balanced on top of the fortress.

"What is it?" Superman snapped.

"Gotham," Sinestro said briskly. "The doubles have appeared and the battle is escalating. We also believe Lex Luthor has betrayed you. He's among the people resisting our forces in Metropolis."

Hal Jordon glanced from Superman to Bruce. Smirked.

Superman stared at them in shock. "Lex?"

"Yes," the Yellow Lantern continued remorselessly. "Wonder Woman and Flash both haven't responded to our summons and with Shazam... gone... we're ill equipped against the doubles. Even the new Joker gangs are proving difficult with their kryptonite stimulants. We're falling back under their advances. We need you."

"But... why didn't you contact me sooner... the Watchtower..."

"The Watchtower was infiltrated and destroyed days ago, Superman. We're still trying to recover what we can to see what it is they took be it information, weapons, or both." Eyes narrowed. "You should have been informed on that account."

Bruce's eyes flicked back to Superman.

"I... haven't..." he scowled. "Okay. I'll handle this. Come with me." Turned to Hal Jordon. "You,

take care of him,” jerked his head toward Bruce. “Take him inside. I’ll be back in a few minutes.”

Sinestro and Superman flew away in a gush of wind.

Hal scowled and showed his middle finger to the departing figures before turning to Bruce.

“So there you are, *Batman*,” he smirked. “You’re not so scary without your cape.”

A beam of yellow shot from the man’s ring and wrapped Bruce in a force field of dull golden light. Bruce gritted his teeth as he was lifted off the ground and transported through the air back towards the open entrance of the fortress.

Hal swooped in, turned into the first room, and dropped Bruce unceremoniously on the floor.

The man grunted in pain as he jarred his ribs.

“Oh,” the Yellow Lantern sneered, “I’m sorry, did I hurt you?”

Bruce’s look was withering.

“I guess you’ll have to ask big blue to kiss it better when he gets back.”

“I never would have picked you as a yellow,” Bruce growled.

“Yeah? Well I never would have picked the all mighty Batman as a faggot.” He stepped closer. “Those are some pretty nasty bruises you’ve got. I never pegged Supes to go for that kind of thing. Or is that you? Are you the one who likes it rough?”

Bruce leant against the wall. Slowly pulled himself to his feet.

“You know this isn’t going to last,” Hal continued as he approached. “He’s going to get bored of

you just like he got bored of Wonder Woman. Only, you don't have a magical island you can run off to. All you'll have to hope for is if someone else in the League takes a fancy to you before he does the execution for real this time."

Bruce snarled at him.

Hal laughed. "That was better when you had the cowl. But don't worry. You're pretty. Far prettier than I would have thought of Batman. I'm sure someone needs a new pet cocksucker. Hey, maybe you'd do even better than big blue." Voice dropped as he came to stand in front of him. "Supes is on the way out, you know. He's losing it. Losing control."

"And Sinestro thinks he could manage it better," Bruce guessed.

"Yes," Hal admitted easily. "But he's not the only one. Oh, sure, I support him. He's the leader of my corps. But it's hard always being second, you know? If someone else came along. Someone who just wanted to rule from afar..."

"You've been talking off world."

"My, aren't you clever."

"You're not," Bruce muttered. "Superman has super hearing."

The yellow lantern grinned and threw his arms wide to the circular hall. "This is the war room," he loudly declared. "It lets off super sonic soundwaves that disrupt long distance super senses from detecting any sounds that are spoken within here. Courtesy of Lex Corp."

Bruce wiped the blood on his lip off on his sleeve and carefully balanced himself against the wall.

"Hah! Look at you. You can hardly stand. What? Was the last blow job a bit tiring? Would you like a rest?" Snorted. "Who would have ever thought the Batman would come down to this? You were such a dominating arse when we were in the League together. Oh, I know, it wasn't *really* you but somehow I doubt you're any different. But now you're as dangerous as a clawless—"

Bruce grabbed him and slammed his head into the wall. Hal cried out in pain and swung a punch back. Bruce ducked, drove his shoulder into the man's back, and yanked his right hand behind him. Pulled off the ring.

Hal's uniform disappeared. As he realised he was in civilian clothes the man's eyes widened, his face drained of colour, and his struggling became wilder. Frantic.

"No! You can't!"

Bruce punched him hard enough to knock him to the ground. Blood splashed from broken nose. Hal looked up at him in disbelief. His reflection mirrored that look a million times in the segmented surface of the ice.

Bruce pushed the ring over his knuckle.

The band was surprisingly cool and seemed to vibrate against his bare skin. As it came in contact with his flesh the insignia flared a brilliant yellow that glittered off every surface in the room.

Hal Jordan launched himself at Bruce. Tackled him down onto the icy ground.

"You can't take that. You know you can't."

Bruce rolled, kicked, and threw the man off him.

"I know."

"In blackest day, and brightest night," Hal spat as he scrambled to his feet, "beware your fears made into light."

The ring lurched on his finger. Threatened to pull off. To fly back towards its master.

"Let those who try to stop what's right—"

Bruce struck Hal. Wrapped his forearm around the man's neck and clutched him to him in a sleeper hold. The man writhed, kicked, and furiously tried to reach back and grab him. Bruce held. After a time Hal fell limp. Bruce held twenty seconds longer, and dropped him carelessly on the ground.

"You were better as a green."

He stood.

The door opened.

Bruce cursed silently to himself as Sinestro and Superman sailed into the room. The Yellow Lantern's eyes widened as he took in the scene. Purple face deepened. Superman's lip curled slightly.

"You know the rules, Bruce," Superman said. "That doesn't belong to you."

Sinestro held up his hand. The ring flew off Bruce's finger and shot into its creator's palm. It flared with colour lighting the strange hue of the alien's eyes.

"You insolent slime," Sinestro snarled. "To desecrate the ring of one of my corpsmen!"

"In less than five minutes," Superman added with a half smile. "God, I missed you, Bruce."

Sinestro's eyes widened in rage, his lips pinched into a tight line, and his face deepened to an alarming colour. "Superman. This... pet of yours jus--"

"This doesn't change anything, Sinestro," Superman interrupted him. "We're still needed in Gotham and if Hal was really so poor a lantern as to fall this easily we are better off without his help."

"Don't go."

Superman cocked an eyebrow at Bruce. “What?”

“Don’t go to Gotham,” Bruce said.

It was all he could do. The only shred of control he could wring from this sick, twisted, situation. It wasn’t much. Damn it, but it was hardly anything at all. A stone tossed down a mountainside in the vain hope it would start a landslide. He hoped it would be enough.

Superman’s grin twisted. Grew ugly. “Oh? And why should I do that?”

“I want you to stay.”

“You also wanted your belt,” Superman said. “What makes you think you have any more sway here than you did then?”

Bruce didn’t hesitate. He couldn’t. “This isn’t the work of Batman and Joker.”

Sinestro’s lips peeled back. “How would you know?”

“Because I know Joker,” Bruce growled, “and I know myself. There is no gain in a forward take over of the cities at this time,” a small lie, “not for the rebels. Nor would either of them go about it in this manner. The only people who would gain anything from such a display are conspirators seeking to tarnish your image of indestructibility and security. Someone has started these uprisings, Superman, but it wasn’t the rebels.” A big lie.

Sinestro swooped forward. “How dare you! You accuse one of us of seeking to overthrow Superman? Hah! You’re a bigger fool than I was led to believe, human.” He jabbed his ring threateningly towards Bruce. “The doubles fight against us. We know the doubles work with the bat!”

“My team members will have joined the fight merely in relation for my assumed death,” Bruce continued, unfazed. “They won’t have anything to do with the trap.”

“Trap?” Sinestro snarled. “What trap?”

Superman hovered by the door. Watching the exchange with narrowed eyes. His reflection shone off a million shards of crystal.

“I don’t know,” Bruce hissed. “But I’d bet you would.”

“Insolent worm!”

“Why is it Superman was informed of this only by the two lanterns?” Bruce growled. “Was there no one else who could be trusted to bring him the way you wanted?”

Sinestro looked ready to murder him.

“And the Watchtower? It was destroyed just before this battle. Convenient. It cuts off connection with the rest of the League. Means whatever you tell Superman he has to accept as true. He has to because Wonder Woman has also vanished taking her lasso with her. Again; convenient.”

Superman’s eyes slipped to Sinestro.

“You think me a fool,” the yellow lantern hissed.

“I think you’re done.”

“Just because you bed the man does not make you his voice,” Sinestro snapped. “He can hear what is happening below. He knows I tell the truth.”

Bruce dropped his voice into the tones usually reserved for the cowl.

“Truth is relative, Lantern.” Looked up at Superman. “Are they rebels? Or frightened people influenced by an artefact of fear?”

“Enough.” Superman floated down towards them. His stare fixed on Bruce. Icy. Cold. “That was a

good performance.”

Sinestro smiled and stepped back to make room for Superman.

“But we both know you can’t be trusted.”

“Sup—”

“Why?” Superman snapped. “Why should I believe you now? Moments ago you were... god Bruce... what kind of an idiot do you think I am?”

“Superman. I...”

“Don’t you dare say it. Don’t you dare say I love you now. Not when I know it’s just to get your own, miserable, way.”

He’d lost. He’d tried to pull one small victory to himself. To salvage one shred of control from the maddened situation he was trapped in. He’d... no. He couldn’t give up. Not yet. This was his only chance to do something good. To make something of this.

Superman turned and flew towards the door.

“I don’t love you Superman,” Bruce said. “I will never love you.”

Eyes flashed red. “Shut up!”

“But, as messed up as your rule here is, it is better than giving rule of the planet to him.” Eyes snapped to Sinestro. “I’m not doing this for you, Superman. I’m doing this for the world.”

Superman span around. “It’s not your world! The only thing of your world is...” his eyes narrowed, “Joker. You’re trying to protect the Joker.” A cold bark of laughter. “Just like Batman tried to do. You’re protecting that murderous monster. You’re as sick and twisted as him.”

Bruce staggered forward. One hand on the wall. “I don’t give a damn about that psychotic clown.”

Superman turned away from him.

“Listen to me! I can prove this!” He pointed at Hal still lying in a messy heap on the floor. “He knows! It’ll take you seconds to get it out of him if you threaten to drop him from height. He’s a yellow lantern now. He won’t have the willpower to lie.”

“You know nothing of my corpsmen,” Sinestro commented bitterly.

“I know they reek of fear. He’ll talk. You ask him to from up there without his ring and he’ll sing.”

Superman was shaking his head. “Goodbye Bruce.”

“You fly out there and, I swear to God, every time you come to me you’ll be fucking a corpse!”

Superman’s face twisted.

“It’ll take you seconds! Do it... do it and I’ll kiss you back no matter what he says.”

Whore.

Hal was stirring. Blinking up at the crystalline roof above him.

Sinestro’s ring glowed dangerously.

Superman glared.

Bruce could still taste him. Superman. He could taste him on his tongue, teeth, and lips. Could smell

him on his skin as sure as the brand blasted across his cheek. Could feel him...

“Fine,” Superman said.

In a blur of blue and red Superman and Hal disappeared.

“No!” Sinestro roared. “We don’t have time for this! We need to get to Gotham!”

Too late. Superman was gone.

The large circular room shone stark and cold around them. Their reflections mingled with the flickering memories stored in the crystals of a dying planet.

“Ah,” Sinestro shook his head, “all these years I thought it unfortunate that Batman had chosen to go rogue. A nuisance. I see now it was a blessing. Had you been at his side all these years... hah... even I dread to think of it. To see the damage you have done today in a few short moments with but a small string of poorly told lies.” He met Bruce’s glare with one of his own. “You should pray your rebels take this chance you’ve bought them. They will not get another.”

The door drew back and Superman swooped through and threw Hal to the ground at his feet. The man was wide eyed and cried out as he struck the icy floor.

“Traitor.”

Sinestro lifted his ring.

Superman barked an order in Kryptonian.

The crystal walls of the fortress shifted and a small army of androids poured into the room. They didn’t wait for an order to attack.

Golden light blazed and beams of energy flew across the room.

Superman gathered Bruce into his arms, gave the fortress another order, and then flew out into the hallway beyond.

"I'm so sorry I doubted you," Superman said as he pulled him closer. Adjusted his hold so he slid his hands sensually over him. "I'm sorry I didn't trust you."

In a heartbeat Bruce knew he had won. A strange, sick, kind of feeling welled up in him at the knowledge. He'd held Superman back from the fight in Gotham. He'd bought the rebels a real chance to take down the rest of the League. He'd given the other Batman a chance to save his world.

Breath against his lips. "You owe me this, Bruce," Superman whispered. "That was the deal."

He'd sold himself to save the world.

Whore.

Bruce closed his eyes, wrapped his arms around Superman's shoulders, and kissed him.

Such a whore.

Superman groaned and deepened the kiss. Hands clutched him closer.

Bruce tilted his head and pressed against him; moved his lips, his mouth, and his tongue. Breath exchanged, skin shared, and a taste so strong it was overwhelming. Poisonous.

You want it so bad.

Bodies together. Hovering. Slowly turning.

Limbs entwined. Mouths locked. Eyes closed.

When Superman finally drew back his face was flushed, eyes sparkling blue, and breathing deep and fast. One hand stroked the side of Bruce's face awakening the bruises that dwelt there.

"Hm..." spoken against his skin, "and what... what would you do for the belt?"

Whore.

Chapter 7

Batman dove to the side as a car slammed nose first into the concrete. Bonnet buckled, windshield shattered, and fuel tank ignited. He hit the ground, rolled onto his feet, and twisted to face the flaming wreckage.

"Oh my," Catwoman purred. "That was a close one, love."

She stalked towards him, hips rolling, and whip ready at the flick of a wrist. Behind her Solomon Grundy picked up another car.

"Tell me. How much can you take before that stimulant of yours wears off, hmmm?"

He didn't have time for this. "Just shut up and fight," he growled.

Green eyes narrowed, fingers tightened around whip, body sunk into catlike crouch. "Ready when you are, big boy."

Grundy hurled his second car. It bounced, rolled, and crashed down just as the pair leapt forward to tackle each other. A broken bumper whirled over his head, glass pelted them in a violent hail, and a hubcap slammed into the woman's shoulder.

She screamed, spun away from him, and landed badly.

"Grundy! You prick! I was handling it!"

The oversized zombie grunted and lumbered towards the next parked car.

Batman grabbed her and threw her unceremoniously through the shopfront of a nearby grocer. She fell through the window, rolled in the air, and landed on her feet among the shattered glass. Blood spilled from a series of small cuts.

She hissed at him and flicked her wrist. Her whip cracked and tightened around Batman's neck.

"Honestly..." she muttered. "Some people..."

Yanked him forward through the broken window and onto the floor. Kicked him.

"Hit a girl why'll she's down, Bruce? That's below the belt." Swung her leg again.

He rolled, caught her foot, and in one precise movement twisted it. Felt the bone crack under his fingertips. Superman had never allowed his allies potent doses of the kryptonite stimulant. Her bones were not reinforced enough to withstand such an attack.

She screamed and fell onto all fours.

"Ah! Now... that's just down right low!" Forced her face into a twisted smile. "I know you like it rough, baby, but we really need to think of a safe word."

She pounced. Wrapped her thighs around his throat and pressed him down, cutting off his air.

He rolled backwards, tucked his legs between them, and kicked her off with a snarl. She tried to stand, leant on her broken ankle, and fell back down with a cry.

"Damn it! Grundy!"

Outside Green Lantern had found Grundy.

Batman pinned her, yanked her arms behind her back, and quickly cuffed her. She yelled, struggled, and with a low laugh realised she was caught.

"Oh, that's embarrassing. I thought I would have done better than that." She twisted to face him. "I suppose this is a bad time, but in case you were wondering, my offer is still on the table." A smile. "You, me, some tropical island." She leant forward, brushed her lips against his. "Hhmmm...think about all the trouble we could get up too."

He drew back.

A flicker of hurt darted across her eyes before she quickly reconstructed her features into a mask of playful indifference. Fast. So fast he couldn't be sure he really saw it at all.

"Stay down, Selina," he growled.

"For you?" A heavy wink. "Anything."

He stood, climbed through the broken window frame, and strode into the street beyond. He doubted she would be there when he got back. He pretended there wasn't anything else he could do to stop her leaving. Grabbled to the rooftops.

Around him the city was in chaos. Protesters with painted on smiles marched the streets waving burning Superman banners above their heads, civilians either fled in all directions or stared agape at the battling superhumans, and in the middle of it stood Vicky Vale loudly reporting on the scene. On Gotham Central street the military struggled to form a line.

Smoke billowed from the windows of a nearby building, the scattered remains of the Atlantain army charged into the rebels with lowered spears, and through it all the two leagues fought. A flash of green. A blur of red. A course battle cry. A scream of pain. War. They were at war.

"Batman!"

He spun. Fists clenched.

"It's me!" Green Arrow climbed up the side of the fire escape and flipped onto the rooftop. To Batman's amazement Harley scrambled up after him. Half her face was mattered with dried blood, her jarring costume was torn, and the tip of one pony tail smouldered. Her eyes were alight in manic delight.

"We're doing it!" Arrow said. "They're pulling back!"

"Report," Batman barked.

Their communications had been severed by the other Cyborg early in the fight.

"Eh. Yes." Arrow straightened. "Both the yellow lanterns haven't come back, Flash is around but he's helping us so I don't know if it's our Flash somehow or if he's gone turncoat, and Shazam and Superman still haven't appeared." He shrugged. "Most of the other league members are either down or falling back."

"Hah!" Harley swung her mallet up onto her shoulder and planted a fist on her hip, striking a triumphant pose. "You hear that, B-man? We've won! League is down for the count! All that's left is knocking that big bully back to his big blown up world." Her grin grew wider. "And even you've got to admit all these new clown kids have helped a heap! I told you Mr J wouldn't let you down."

Arrow grinned at her. "You know, Harl. I never liked you before. But, blast it, you're right. I think we've got this one."

"Hell yeah we do!" Harley cried. "Have you seen what's going on down there? It's madder than an insane asylum. I should know." Dropped a wink at Arrow. "Thanks Green. I missed you when you died."

The man lifted an eyebrow.

"We still need to be careful," Batman reminded them. "Superman is far from powerless."

Harley snorted. "He was too chicken even to show. I bet he's hiding under the bed! Besides," she grinned wildly. "I see you've got a big blue of your own flying around. Say one thing for you clones..."

"We're not clones," Arrow growled.

"...you've got a real knack for time..."

"Get down!"

Batman didn't need to be told twice. He threw himself off the side of the building, grabbed one of the gargoyles, and swung onto its under side as Grundy flew overtop; fists flailing, legs missing, and meaningless roar of noise coming from his mouth. A giant green clever neatly diced the creature in two where he fell to the street below still bellowing.

"Zombies," Green Lantern panted. "Hate them."

"He'll put himself back together," Batman snarled and he swung back onto the rooftop. "Get him into the cells."

"Eh..."

"I'll do that," Lex dropped from the sky. His armour was matted with ash and scraped along one side but otherwise intact. Lantern and Arrow shared a look. "We need him on the battle field in case the yellow lanterns come back," Lex reasoned. "You don't need me."

"Right," Batman agreed.

Lantern flew away.

Lex stayed.

"Both Aquaman are engaged with each other down on the edge of the narrows," he reported, "I don't know which is which so I can't say who is winning but one is clearly doing better than the other. Fortunately the Atlantians also seem to be struggling to pick them apart."

Harley giggled and bit her lip. Said nothing.

"Killer Frost and our Wonder Woman are fighting three blocks over but Frost isn't going to last much longer, both Nightwing and Raven are down, and our Superman is battling Adam over the industrial district."

"Where is Hawkgirl?"

"I don't think she's in play anymore," Arrow spoke up.

"Yeah," Harley bobbed her head. "She got punched through a few buildings by Supes."

They were winning. They were being allowed to win. Why? Why would Shazam and Superman not show? Why would the lanterns leave? Why would they not back up the rest of the league? It didn't make sense. Four of their most powerful players were off the field for no obvious reason. And with Flash apparently switching sides they were handing the advantage to Batman. They were dividing their forces... and Batman couldn't understand why.

There had to be a missing link. Something he'd overlooked. Something small.

But he couldn't... the war raged below him, above him, everywhere around him... he couldn't stop and consider. He didn't have the time to figure this one out. Not while people were fighting. Not while people were dying.

"Lex," he barked, "get Grundy into confinement. You'll find a cell for him in warehouse six on the east side docks."

The man nodded. "It shouldn't take me long. Then I'll find and contain the Hawk if possible." His suit whirled to life as he left.

"Arrow," Batman turned, "would you know your world's Aquaman on sight?"

"Arthur?" Arrow grinned. "Heck yeah. We're pals man."

"Then get down there and make sure he's winning. If he isn't rectify the situation."

"Got it boss."

"Harley."

"Yeah, B-man? What do you need?"

"Get your clowns to put out those fires before the city burns," he snarled.

She pouted. "Can't I go with Green? I want to see the two fish fight."

"No."

She rolled her eyes. "You're a real buzz kill B-man."

The pair left.

Batman pulled the grapple from his belt and dove between the buildings. Swung. Glided. Ran. Control. He had to maintain control. He had to keep pushing forward. He had to win this war.

But to do that he needed answers.

Flash was outside a burning building when Batman found him. His uniform was ripped in several places and he was bleeding from a series of small cuts. Despite this the man's eyes shone with a savage, bright, light.

When he saw Batman he leapt back with a yelp of surprise and tried to run. Tangled his legs in one of the tripwires Batman had dropped as he approached and fell into the concrete with enough force to crack it.

"Hey! No man!" Flash cried as he tore at the bindings. "You got it wrong! I've been helping! I swear!"

Batman dropped from the gutter to land on the road beside him. Glared.

A blur of panicked wriggling. "Holy shit holy shit holy shit -- look! I'm not going to fight! I promise. I disarmed a whole bunch of troops before and I took down Bane. Yeah! He was bringing in some reinforcements and I took him down for you. I'm on your side. I swear. Also I saved the people over

there. And helped Green Arrow! He was fighting some of Arthur's spear guys I helped!"

"Where is Superman?"

"Hey, I don't know. I'm not in contact. I'm done with it. Done with him. I promise."

"Where is he?"

"Look. I don't know! I've seen him flying around but I've been running every time he gets close, you know? And he hasn't followed."

Wrong Superman.

Flash didn't know anything.

Batman's hand clenched into a fist.

The speedster's eyes widened. "Look," he forced a grin, words slurred, "I know this shit has just got really real and I know I was on the wrong side and that we were real bad for a real long time and you went through some shit but I promise really I do that I didn't ever mean for it to turn out like this." A frantic breath. "We were making a better world, you know? And Superman sounded so right and he told us things you'd said and I believed him. It was stupid. I know. But you gotta believe me. We were always mates, Bats. And I never meant for it to get like this. Killing baddies was bad but it was a better bad than the other kind. Killing... killing the good guys... and what he did to the other you and to Wonder Woman and how.... How he didn't care that things were going to shit. He didn't care about the world. Not really. That's where I hopped off. I left. I'm not going to follow him anymore. I swear it."

His face was flushed behind his mask, his skin dotted with sweat and soot, and his eyes wide and staring.

He didn't know anything. He was just wasting time.

Batman knelt beside the speedster and began to release the trip wires wrapped around the other mans

legs.

"Oh, thanks Bats, really. Like I said, I know this whole thing has been a really messed up ride but..." he froze, breath hitched, face drained of colour. "Bats! Get out of here!"

A shadow fell over them.

Batman lurched onto his feet, yanked a series of batarangs from his belt, and spun to face this new attacker.

Superman glared down at him. Eyes red. Cape billowing behind him.

For a moment Batman couldn't move. For a moment he couldn't think. He could only see the anger in those eyes, could only see the dirt, ash, and blood matted across his fists, and the jarring crest emblazoned across his chest. The man he had fought for years, the symbol that had become the stamp of his city's oppression, and the monster that had forcefully taken control of the world.

"Where is he?" Superman snarled. "He should be here! Why isn't he here?!"

Batman stared a moment longer. Noticed the differences in uniform, the slight extra length of hair, the lack of lines around his brow. "Clark?"

Clark's eyes slipped to Flash still prone on the ground. "Where is he?"

"Y-y-you're a double," Flash stammered. "Y-y-you have a double Superman." He was pulling against the cords around his ankles so tight they were pushing through the fabric of his uniform and cutting his flesh. "You are a double.... Right?"

Clark floated closer. "Yes. Where is *your* Superman? Why hasn't he come?"

"I... I don't know. I thought you were him. I thought..."

"He doesn't know anything, Clark," Batman sighed.

Clark turned his gaze to Batman. Red eyes stricken with a flood of violent emotions. Rage, hate, hurt...

"Why hasn't he come?" He sounded like a child. Hopeless. Confused. Upset. "Where is he? This was meant... this was meant to..."

"I don't know, Clark."

"Why wouldn't he come? He's killed for this. He's killed... he needs to answer for that, Batman. I can't just let him get away with it. I..." he blinked away the colour in his eyes. "God, I'm sorry, I forgot I need to report." A shuddering breath. "Uh. Hawkgirl and Adam are both down. So is Frost. I saw Diana wrap her in a stop sign. And... and the Aquamans? The Aquamen? Their still fighting but they dove off the docks and are now doing it underwater. One of them got shot by Arrow. I think it's their one. It's hard to tell." Another shaking intake of air. "Um... I haven't seen the Yellow Lanterns in ages..."

"That's enough. It's okay."

Clark nodded. Eyes down. "What... what do we do now, Batman?"

The question hung unanswered in the air. What could they do but keep fighting? What could they do but struggle to save the people pooling in the streets around them? To save the city under siege? What could they do but try to stay together and end this?

Batman dropped to one knee and quickly released Flash from his bonds. The man bound to his feet in a flurry of limbs. Moved to leave. Paused.

"I-if you need a report I took down the military reinforcements from Metropolis. But then the screams... there are a lot of people in danger here."

"I didn't want this to happen in the city," Batman muttered. "The Joker Gangs forced our hand."

"Superman thinks you and the Joker are working together." Flash said.

"I thought he might," Batman replied.

The Joker had become a martyr since his death. A symbol. Superman's first killing. Since then Batman had tolerated the painted on grins of the rouges and rebels. But the return of the man himself changed that. Joker was violent, unpredictable, and now had a small army behind him. All Batman could do to maintain some semblance of control was fail to rebuff the rumours of their partnership. At least until they found the man. But Harley was hiding him. Insisting upon his good intentions... and right now Batman didn't have time to hunt him.

"We need to regroup," he muttered. "Get Gotham under control. Then strike against the Fortress. He must be there. Perhaps the others with him. We'll need to be ready."

"The Fortress," Flash echoed. "You're going to the Fortress?"

"Get out of here, Flash," Batman growled. "Before I change my mind about letting you off this time."

The man shivered. "No! You can't do that! They saw me helping you... I'm on your side."

"He's giving you a head start," Clark said. "Take it."

Flashed looked at him, back at Batman, nodded once, and disappeared.

They were alone. The street was long, littered with rubble, and beside them the apartment block burned. But the fighting had moved on. It was like a drink of cold water on a hot day. A small fragile mercy in this brutal bloody war.

"Will you be alright?"

"I can do this, Batman."

"We'll get him, Clark."

"I... I know that..."

"I promise you."

"I know... it's just..." a broken sigh, "it's not right. It's not right that he can just... and... now he doesn't even show. Why? Why did he kill Bruce if he doesn't even care? Did... he can't have... died for nothing..."

"He didn't..."

"What is it then? What did he die for?" Clark raked some fingers through his hair. "I... I can't make sense of it. It's not right. It's... wrong. Everything. Why would he do it? Why would he kill him? Why would I kill him? He was just... just after the Joker... he didn't even know about this world."

The man's breathing was ragged. Worn. Thoughts spilt in muddled words.

"He's in the Fortress. I know he is. He's got to be. Where else would he go?" Turned to Batman. "Look. I can take him. I need to take him. We've got his League now. I can fly up and..."

"We can't risk it." Batman interrupted him. "He could have Shazam and the Lanterns with him. Even without them..."

"And what if this is some plan? What if he wants us to hold back? I... I need to get up there."

Batman glared. "No. You don't."

"I need to face him! He needs to... Br-Batman this isn't... he killed my best friend."

"And he's killed a lot more people besides," Batman snarled. "I've been fighting this war for years, Clark. I have seen what he can do. I have seen what *you* can do. I'm not going to give up the best chance we have of stopping him for your revenge."

Face crumbled. "This is bigger than that!"

"No it isn't!"

Clark straightened suddenly. Turned.

"What is it?"

Eyes glared through buildings to lock onto a target. Hands balled into fists.

"Is he?"

"It's Doomsday."

Clark lifted off the ground. Batman grabbed his wrist. "Don't do this, Clark."

The look in the man's eyes was alien.

"Please."

"I need to get Doomsday off inhabited land anyway," he said slowly. "I might as well return him to his owner." Shrugged him off.

Batman watched him fly away. Stunned.

"No..."

He'd already lost Clark once. He couldn't... he couldn't lose him again. Not like this. He couldn't stand by and watch as Clark killed. As Clark, once again, destroyed himself to become the avenging god Superman.

But what could he do?

With a sickening lurch he knew the answer. Nothing. He was as powerless as he'd always been against this man. Against Superman. He couldn't stop him. He couldn't hold him. All he could do was try desperately to stop him getting himself killed. He needed to get the League together. He needed to get to the Fortress.

He hoped he wouldn't be too late.

Chapter 8

Kryptonite.

Doomsday fell through the sky before him. Gray skin adorned with a series of overgrown bone shards, teeth overspilling the gaping confines of his mouth, and red small eyes rolling. Clark drove his fist into his cheek.

It felt like kryptonite.

A gargled cry of pain. The gigantic body rolled over in the air. Limbs flailing as he plummeted from the atmosphere to smash through the crystalline crown resting just off the peak of the Earth's North Pole. Shinning in a spill of sunlight; the Fortress of Solitude.

Buried deep in his chest.

Clark dove through the hole in the roof and with a roar slammed into Doomsday. Punched him. Again. And again. Punched him until those massive, reinforced fists stopped swinging back. Punched him until the shape of his jaw distorted around his fist. Punched him until the savage, angry, intelligence in those eyes faded behind a haze of pain. Then he punched some more.

Behind his crest, between his ribs, in his heart.

Kept landing blow after blow on the monster battered and bleeding on the floor of the ice fortress below him even as those gigantic limbs sagged down, the body under him slumped, and eyes clouded over into unconsciousness.

It felt like kryptonite... hurt like kryptonite... but it wasn't kryptonite. If it was kryptonite he could slump down on the floor, court unconsciousness, and wait for Bruce to roll him over and pull it out with a scalding comment on his uselessness. If it was kryptonite then he could lie down under the weight of the pain, under the weight of his own weakness, and pretend this was all some sick twisted dream. If it was kryptonite... but it wasn't. It wasn't anything. No. It was the opposite. A lack. A hollow. A hole.

A hole driven into his chest by his own failure.

With a cry he pulled himself free of Doomsday and rose up into the middle of the room.

"Where are you?!"

Voice bounced off memory lined walls.

"Get out here! Face me!"

Blood. There was blood and pieces of shorn metal. Clark stared down at the room. Saw it for the first time. Saw the scorch marks on the walls, the ripped up androids, and the two bodies lying abandoned on the floor. The Yellow Lanterns. He'd killed them...

"I should have known they'd pull you over eventually." A cold voice. A familiar voice. His voice.

He turned to see Superman drift in to the room, arms across, eyes glowing red.

"What have you done?"

Lip curled. "They were planning on betraying me."

"So you killed them!" Clark felt his own eyes blaze. "Just like you kill everyone who stands against you!"

"Yes!" Superman clenched his fist before him. "I saved this planet. Anyone who stands against me and my world doesn't *deserve* to live!"

Clark felt like he'd just dove into the sun. Hot. Hate. Power. Rage. With a cry that blasted hurricanes from his throat he shot forward in time with his snarling counterpart. The pair collided with a crack of thunder.

And that hole inside him seemed to gape even wider. Rip open. Bleed.

He'd killed Bruce. He'd killed him as surly as if he had stared beams of heat vision through the man's skull himself. The second he realised what had happened he should have pushed, relentlessly, unstopping. He shouldn't have rested, he shouldn't have hesitated, and he shouldn't have... if he'd broken through just a day... a single day earlier...

Clark felt himself knocked to the ground, a flash of pain as heat vision struck his chest, and a fist to the side of his face, followed by a second. He caught the third swing and threw Superman across the room to smash into the wall in a shower of broken crystal.

It was him. He had killed his best friend. He had killed Bruce.

He bolted across the room to pummel Superman against the wall. To smash that face, his face, into the solid shafts of crystal. Into the fragmented memories of krypton. Into the recorded teaching of truth and justice. He beat that body, his body, even as it struck him back. Even as it knocked him across the room through the far wall. Even as they grappled on the icy hallway of the fortress floor.

"You don't understand," his reflection spat. "You think you can make a difference in the world just by pulling kittens from trees. You think you inspire people. You think you'll lead humanity to a better place."

Clark cried out as a fist slammed under his ribs.

"But you're wrong. You can save one person only to watch a million more sink into complacency, into expectation, into the lie that is freedom. Without authority humankind becomes stagnant; it festers."

Another blow. Connected with his cheek.

"Only a precious few dare to even crane their necks in hope of seeing your inspiring light. Only a few find your inspiration. And it doesn't matter. It doesn't matter because in the end *everything* will be destroyed by some madman. And you have to wonder if you didn't also inspire that. If you didn't encourage it every time you left one of these monsters alive."

A third blow slammed him into the ground as he tried to fly.

"We're gods among them! We have the power to save them. To save their planet! No. We have a *responsibility* to do it. To make a perfect world."

Clark dodged the next strike and returned with one of his own. Knocked Superman reeling into the domelike ceiling.

"Your perfect world killed my best friend! You killed my best friend! Why?!"

Flew up and grabbed Superman by the front of his uniform. Rammed him back into the crystalline wall. For an instant the memory in that crystal was of a baby, wrapped in a red blanket, being put into a rocket. The hope of a dying planet depicted in perfect detail beside the alien tyrant.

Superman frowned and then slowly a small, cold, smile slipped across his lips. "Bruce. You're talking about Bruce."

Clark roared and drove his fist into his face. Again and again.

Die. All he wanted was for this monster, this alien, this evil, twisted, thing to die. To end. To stop. To slump to the ground just as Bruce had done, blood dripping down forehead, and cease. Like a flame blown out in a gust of wind. It was what he deserved. It was all he deserved. He'd killed him. He'd killed Bruce. He'd... failed. It was him. Clark. He'd failed. He'd come too late. He had killed Bruce.

Superman blasted him with an icy breath. It knocked him out of the air. Drove him into the ground. Superman collided with him like a missile. Felt the fists hammer into him. And all he wanted was to die. To die for his failure. To die for what he'd done to Bruce. It was what he deserved. It was all he deserved. He'd killed him. No. *He* had killed him. Superman. He had killed Bruce and he didn't even care.

Didn't feel a hole like kryptonite.

Clark screamed and attacked him. Attacked him madly. Wildly. Took the punches, the blasts of heat vision, and the gusts of ice laced air. Took it all and ignored the damage. Ignored the pain. Ignored everything and attacked in every way he knew how.

Because there was nothing left. Nothing but hurt, hate, and horror. Nothing but pain, rage, and

revenge. Nothing but the man, the monster, in front of him that wore his face and his crest. Nothing but him and the end. The end of them both. The end of everything.

He fought until the damage of his body built into agony, until his bones ached with the mind numbing over expenditure of energy, and until they were both grabbling, snarling, and striking each other in a violent tangle.

"You don't understand." Superman hissed as they grabbed each other. "It'll take a bomb to make you understand. It'll take Lois, and Jimmy, and all of Metropolis to make you understand."

"You killed him," Clark heard himself say. "You killed him. No reason. You killed him." It was all he could say. The accusation stuck on repeat.

"You would have come sooner. You would have taken him from me."

"You killed him. You killed him."

"He was meant to realise. Meant to understand."

"You killed him. You... you don't deserve... I don't..."

"He was meant to love me."

Clark punched him, sunk his fingers in his hair, and dragging them both to their feet slammed his face into the wall. Again and again. Superman cried out in pain, tried to pull himself free, and then went limp. Clark pushed him to the ground in a shower of crushed crystal. Superman stared up at him. His breathing was ragged, his face twisted with pain, eyes dim and defeated.

"You killed him," Clark said slowly. "You don't deserve to live."

"Clark, don't!"

Batman appeared between him and Superman. Glare cold. So cold it burnt.

"He's down. Back off."

Clark struggled to control his breathing. Struggled to keep the anger, the hurt, the wretched pain from his voice. "He killed my friend, Batman."

Voice a low, threatening, growl. "Back off."

"He deserves it."

The rest of the League had arrived. They circled around the scene as if unsure which kryptonian they should contain.

Clark turned away from them. Away from Batman. Away from everything. He deserved it. He deserved to be hated, to be feared, to be condemned. He deserved their suspicion, their mistrust, their... He'd failed. He'd failed the most important person in his life. Failed because he hadn't realised... god... Hadn't realised how important Bruce was, how fragile he was, how much he needed him until he was gone. Leaving a hole like krypto---

"*Kal-El*," Superman rasped. He was speaking in Kryptonian. "*Listen.*"

Clark stared at him. Stared at Batman. Stared at.... He could hear Bruce. Bruce's heartbeat. Beating in a perfect echo of Batman's.

"You... you didn't..."

"We're the same, Kal-El. It is only circumstance that divides us. Circumstance that opened my eyes to the truth. Circumstance that kept you blind." A small wretched smile. *"But, knowing how you feel about him... how could you think my feelings would differ? How can you be so arrogant to believe that I would not try to save him?"*

"Enough!" Batman barked.

*"And if it wasn't for **his** lies," Superman snarled at Batman, "I would have. Just like I saved this pla--"*

At a look from Batman Aquaman struck Superman across the jaw silencing him. He'd said enough.

Before Batman could confront him Clark bolted from the room and shot through the twisting corridors of the fortress. Towards the unmistakable sound of that heartbeat. Toward Bruce.

Bruce. His Bruce. His friend. Alive.

Clark felt dizzy, scared, and desperately weak. He couldn't... couldn't quite trust... couldn't let go of his grief unless it was some kind of trick. Some kind of trap. Because he couldn't... he wouldn't survive that. He wouldn't survive Bruce being lost to him again. But despite himself he felt the hole in his chest well with hope. Light, frantic, fleeting, hope.

Bruce was alive.

He ducked through the retreating walls, wove around the corridors, and as the heartbeat got closer, almost deafening, he found him. And froze.

Bruce sat on the corner of a bed wearing civilian clothes with the bat belt draped across his knees. A single batarang made a lazy loop around the room and returned to the man's fingers. His eyes locked onto Clark. Blistering. Hating.

"Bruce..." Clark rasped. "Oh... god."

"What do you want, Superman?" His voice was cold. Careful.

"Bruce it's..." his eyes dragged over the bruises covering more than half of Bruce's face. "I'm..."

Relief and horror warred inside him. Ripped at him. Threatened to pull him apart. And suddenly all he could do was drop to the ground and grope for something to lean against. Found the wall.

"I... I tried to come sooner... I should have come... my fault. I'm so sorry. This is all my fault." A shuddering breath. "I thought you were dead. We all did. We... I... I thought he'd... Bruce. I'm so sorry. I just... I'm so glad you're alive. I wish... I should have come. The second you were missing I should have come."

Bruce's face was slowly changing. The glare slowly melting away into a disbelieving stare.

"I... I stopped him. He won't. I won't let him near you. I won't.... I'm so sorry. I..." He was crying. Breathless broken gasps of air accompanied by a flooding of tears. Tears he hadn't cried since he'd first seen the hazy execution tape in the bottom on the batcave. Tears of anger, tears of loss, and tears of relief.

Bruce shoved the belt aside, stood, grunted in pain as he stood on his right leg and fell.

Instantly Clark moved across the room and caught him.

The man jerked back violently, stopped, and forcibly relaxed. Clenched his fists and wrapped his arms around Clark in a savage, crushing, hug.

"I thought you were dead," Clark heard himself say. Choking back the tears.

A gruff growl. "I know."

Clark tightened his hold around the man. Heard Bruce gasp. Looked down. Through his skin. Felt his eyes dry in shock. Two of his ribs were broken. Looked further. His leg. His hand. His hip bone was bruised almost in the shape of... Clark looked back at Bruce's face, at the shocking bruises that had frozen him when he'd first arrived. Reached up and gently matched his fingers to the marks on Bruce's skin. A fingertip, a knuckle, a... With a sickening lurch realised the origin of some of the other bruises. And... among it all, like the flag of a conqueror, was his signature. Branded low on Bruce's right cheek.

Bruce watched realisation spread across his features. Watched as what Clark had first picked as signs of torture became...

"He... he... *touched*... you?"

Bruce didn't say anything.

"He..." Rage choked his voice. "He *forced* you?"

Bruce flinched.

Clark realised his eyes were glowing.

Realised what that flicker of fear in Bruce at seeing his eyes redden meant.

Realised the brutality of the mark on his cheek.

With a snarl he scooped Bruce up and flew from the room. Flew back through the twisting hallways of the fortress. Flew back to where Batman, the Justice League, and Superman waited. They stood in a rough circle around the prone kryptonian that was now bound in the lasso of truth. Stared as Clark entered and carefully put Bruce down in the corner where he could lean against the wall.

Green Arrow started forward. "Bruce? Bruce you're alive! You son of a gun I knew..." he stopped as he saw the wounds, the bruises, and the brand. His face paled as he quickly came to the same ugly conclusion as Clark had. The same dark realisation that was, one at a time, dawning on the League members gathered there.

Clark turned and strode towards Superman. The league members slowly backed out of his way leaving only Batman, standing staunch, unmovable, against him. There was a hard resignation in his eyes. A dark familiarity. He was used to this. Used to being a man standing alone. Alone against gods.

"I can't let you do this, Clark."

"Get out of my way."

Batman's hand was moving under the cape. Moving along the edge of his belt. Into one of the

compartments.

"You don't have to do this. To become this."

Clark held out his hand. "Give that to me."

Batman stared at him.

"The kryptonite," Clark said, "in your hand. Give it to me."

Eyes narrowed.

"I won't kill him."

Superman watched the exchange with the eye of a man knowing his fate was being decided.

Batman pulled out the shard of green and, with a hard look, deposited it into Clark's hand. Cold, mind numbing, pain flared from the contact sending a wave of dizziness coursing through him. He gritted his teeth and forced himself to stay standing, to keep his stare locked onto Batman, to keep his hand held out before him.

"And... a batarang. I need a... batarang..."

Batman paused. Reading the signs of his weakness. He knew he could stop him if Clark crossed a line. He knew he could drag him away from Superman with the ease of a parent pulling a young child. He reached into another compartment on his belt and pulled out the sharpened weapon. Put it beside the kryptonite on Clark's palm.

Clark closed his hand, felt the edges of the batarang cut into his fingers, and fought back the cold heavy ache that threatened to crush him under the weight of his own weakness; fought the dizziness that fogged the corners of his eyes; fought the chilling numbness that was creeping through his hand. He clung to his rage, to the soul splitting anger that flashed white hot in his core with heavy beat of his heart, to his purpose. His revenge.

Batman watched silently as Clark staggered around him and moved towards Superman. His enemy was sweating, gasping, already struggling against the effects of the kryptonite. His eyes were fixed on Clark's closed fist. On the blood that trickled between those fingers.

"Kal-El... Don't..."

Clark fell upon him. Knocked him back against the ground. Pinned him. Bound as he was there wasn't anything he could do. Nothing but stare up at Clark with eyes fogged with pain and stammer in a string of different languages.

Clark slammed Superman's face down, to one side, and with gritted teeth drove the edge of the batarang into his cheek. Superman cried out in pain as Clark relentlessly ran the sharpened edge across his features in ugly, misshapen, bat symbol. It took longer than he'd hoped. Fighting the effects of the kryptonite, the scrutiny of the league, and his own fluxing anger, he finally finished. Dropped the kryptonite and the batarang. Began to crawl, numbly, away. Away from the pain, away from his failure, away from Superman.

Diana grabbed his shoulder and hauled him to his feet.

"Come on. It's okay. You're okay. He deserved it. It's okay."

He was snarling, crying, gasping, staggering... his hand was covered with blood. His blood. Superman's blood.

"It's okay. We'll get that looked at. You're okay. Breathe."

"Damn you!" Superman yelled after him between strangled gulps of air. "Damn you! You can't take... you can't take my world! ...you can't! I fought for it! I saved it! I could have saved... saved him... You can't take him!"

Clark leaned against the wall, breathing heavily, and looked back at the scene behind him. No one seemed sure of what should happen next. No one seemed willing to be the one to step forward and silence the raving mad man.

"You don't... understand," Superman snarled at him through the bloody mark on his face. "But you will. You will."

"You don't know anything about me."

"I know you, Kal-El," Superman said in kryptonian. His anger seemed to give him strength. To steady his words. To bring a savage snarl onto his lips. "There is no difference between us. None! You see what I did to Bruce and you glare down at me as if you wouldn't have done the same!" A cold bark of laughter. "As if you haven't dreamed of it. As if you haven't imagined taking him, having him, holding him down and fucking him! As if you hadn't wondered what it would feel like to have the dark, blue eyed, Batman, in you, under you, around you." The lasso blared bright gold around the man's shoulders. An accusing, branding, light.

"Shut up."

"You want him. I know you do. You want to save him, to protect him, to keep him safe. You want to love him, to be loved by him, to show him the world and have him by your side. You want him. And sooner or later you'll realise you need to lead the way. He won't come after you. You need to go after him. Take him. Show him. Force him to see--"

"Shut up!"

"Why?" Superman growled. *"Because it makes you feel justified if you can pretend there is nothing of me in you? If you pretend the loss of Metropolis, of Lois, of my son, has driven me insane?"*

"Hasn't it?"

"I..." the lasso flared hot. *"I... I'm not... not..."*

"What are you afraid of?" Clark whispered. "Speak English so everyone can understand."

Superman glared around at the leaguers surrounding him. At Batman standing over him. At Aquaman glaring icy hatred down at him. At Green Lantern holding up his ring. Wonder Woman next to Clark. Arrow helping to support Bruce.

His shoulders slumped, his eyes closed, and he fell back against the floor. Surrendering to the proximity of the kryptonite, to the pain of his carved face, to his defeat at the hands of the Justice League.

"There is no difference between us," he whispered. "Just circumstance. Under it all we're the same."

Bruce lurched off the wall as if he had been stung, pushed Green Arrow aside with a snarl, and limped towards Superman. Kicked him despite his broken bones. Kicked him with a practised knowledge of how to do the most damage, of how to make the alien cry out in pain, of how to most hurt him.

Then, face as telling as stone, he fell onto Superman and systematically replicated his own broken bones onto his tormentor. Smashed his right hand into the ground with a simple twist, broke two ribs with the heel of his palm, and seized his leg, rolled back, and shattered his thigh. His eyes were dark, bleak, barren.

"Bruce," Arrow stepped forward nervously. "That's enough. He's... don't..."

"Get back."

"Look, I get it, I know this is..." he put a hand on Bruce's shoulder.

Bruce turned on him and shoved him. Hard. "Get the fuck away from me!"

Clark stared in dry mouthed horror as Bruce turned back to Superman and reached for the bloody batarang. Instantly Batman was on him. He expertly deflected Bruce's blows and bodily dragged the man away. Away from Superman. Away from the League. Away to the other end of the room. There he held him bent forward and muttered low into his ear.

Even with the kryptonite nearby Clark could just make out some of the words. Low. Pitched. Angry.

"...not finished with you. Never finished with you."

Bruce had stopped struggling. Stared sightlessly forward. Listening.

A growl. "You're. Not. Finished. Yet."

The other league members looked towards them nervously, unable to hear what was going on, unable to understand the sudden stillness to the previously wrestling pair. Only Aquaman could hear the conversation. The Atlantean's face mirrored the same confusion Clark felt. The same slipping sensation as he realised how little he really knew about The Batman. At how he failed to grab the greater meaning of those words.

Batman spoke in a course whisper. "Bruce... don't be afraid."

"Gotham..." Bruce began.

Instantly Batman let go of Bruce and pulled off his cape and cowl. Dropped them into the other man's hands. "Needs you. And you'll need these."

Bruce clutched the fabric to his chest, ran his fingers along the soot stained memory cloth, and nodded.

Slowly the pair returned to them.

Batman began barking orders.

Bruce stood silent and alone.

Clark watched him hopelessly as he realised there was nothing he could do. Nothing to make this better. Nothing to wipe away the bruises on his skin, the mark on his face, or the bleak darkness in his eyes. He'd failed. He'd failed to protect him. He'd failed to save him. He'd failed him.

As they flew back to Gotham, Bruce standing on Green Lantern's platform, the hole in his chest began to reopen.

In the days that followed, as Superman was locked away, governments reinstated, and the world

given back to the people, it gaped wider.

As the portal was repaired, the Joker captured, and as the two Batmen retreated to plan against any further contingencies he felt it hurt... hurt like kryptonite.

He embraced it. The ache, the agony, the absence. Because he deserved it. Because some small, sick, part of his mind kept returning to what Superman had said. Kept thinking about all the times and all the ways he'd looked at Bruce; at the way Bruce moved while fighting, at the flash of blue eyes behind his lenses as he turned his head, and at the precise movement of the man's lips as he spoke.

Superman was right. There is no difference between them. Between the murderer, the dictator, the rapist... and him.

He struggled to reject the idea, to forget and dismiss the words, to prove to himself he was someone, anyone, else. Anyone other than the man that had killed on a whim. Anyone other than the man who had ripped freedom from this planet. Anyone other than the man that had held down and hurt his best friend. Hurt him so badly he may never heal.

He let himself hurt. Let himself revel in the pain of what he'd destroyed. Of what he'd failed to save. Of what he was. Because it was what he deserved.

"Clark."

Clark floated in the back of the batcave and stared unseeing at the wall. "Batman?" He turned. Froze as he saw the caped figure below. The edge of Superman's brand spilled from the corners of the cowl. Bruce... Clark dropped slowly to the floor. Noticed with a pang of remorse Bruce shift slightly away from him.

"Bruce I..."

"Come on, Clark."

"I..."

"Let's go home."

It wasn't much. A slight softening in Bruce's usual growl at the end of the last word. A tiny relaxing of muscle around the corners of his mouth. A flash of deep boned weariness in the piecing blue of his stare. A slight slip of the mask. Of the Bat.

It wasn't much. But it was enough. Just enough to show him that maybe there was a future somewhere close by. A point beyond this. A point where maybe, just maybe, things could be normal between them again. Where the world could be sane, safe, and familiar. Where they could move beyond the scars, the hurt, the loss... where maybe... everything would be okay.

"Home," Clark nodded numbly, "I would like that."

End Notes

This was first posted in the [Superman/Batman archive](#) (where the original remains) but I feel it's big enough to move out of home and explore some other sites and audiences. That said, if you're interested in this pairing there are some fantastic stories over there and the weather is lovely this time of year. I would highly recommend a visit.

I am still learning both as a writer and as a fan fiction writer so any feedback, rants, or general comments whatsoever are really awesome and all of them help and/or make me feel great. Seriously, it was only the people over at the archive which gave me enough support to finish this so I know and love the power of community.

I hoped you liked it, I hope you'll check out the sequel, and I hope you're having a great day!

Works inspired by this one: [Несправедливость](#) by [kid1412heart](#)

Please [drop by the archive and comment](#) to let the author know if you enjoyed their work!